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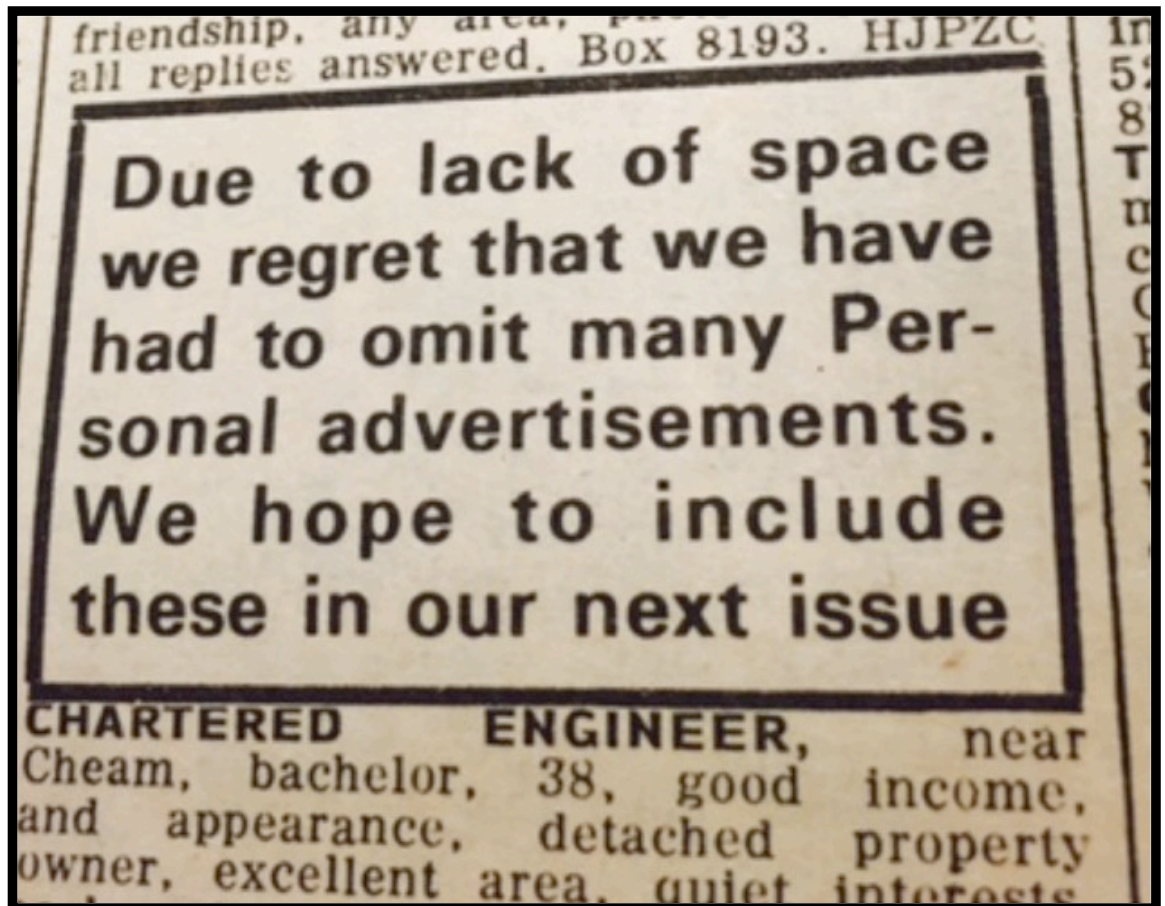
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The matchmaking industry and singles culture in Britain, 1970-2000



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Submitted for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy

The University of Sussex

July 2017

¹Image from *The London Weekly Advertiser*, 16-22 May 1973, p. 53.

Declaration:

I, Zoe Strimpel, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis charts the expansion of the British dating industry after 1970, using singles services as a lens for assessing the impact of a period of rapid sexual and gender-political change on romantic aspiration. Its central contention is that by studying mediated courtship, we gain a new window onto the very heart of change in late 20th century Britain – namely, the transformation of the gender order. Courtship lets us see how this transformation – normally studied in political, sexual, demographic or cultural terms – was played out in the everyday affective and social lives of individuals. The thesis is arranged in four chapters, with sources centring on first person testimony (Mass Observation diaries, oral history, reader letters, television interviews, memoirs) and newspaper discourse. The first chapter discusses the demographic, cultural and discursive context in which Britain's expanding population of single people increasingly sought commercial, third-party romantic aid. Chapters Two and Three set out the structure of the mediated dating industry and its most prominent characters alongside an analysis of the flashpoints that shaped how it was perceived. In the final chapter, I turn to daters' memory and experience in terms of their self-identifications, expectations and encounters. The evidence analysed here is used to argue for the emergence of a new and distinctive 'single' identity in the period. Moreover, by interrogating the production of romance and the conditions in which it could take place, I show that at the heart of heterosexuality in late 20th century Britain there existed a relationship *between* rapid change and older feelings. This dynamic has not so far been adequately accounted for by historians and is, I argue, integral to a full understanding of relational life in the period.

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Introduction

In February 1981, Elaine Weeks, a newly trained nurse working at St Mary's Paddington, was still single. She was 31 and had tried various means of meeting men – membership at the BFI, a series of subscriptions with a computer dating firm, and even a temporary office job where she knew there would be more male colleagues than there were in nursing. But nobody special enough emerged. So she decided to look at the well-known lonely hearts section of *Time Out*. Among a sea of men 'bigging themselves up', one ad caught her eye.¹ This one didn't boast about his directorship of a company (what those companies were almost always remained vague); instead it read: "NOT a thrusting CEO, but rather, a calm, articulate arts graduate'. 'That sounds more like it,' Weeks remembered thinking, and wrote to him. Their first date at a pub in Paddington led to subsequent dates and an eventual happy marriage.

Elaine, born in 1951, was – like many of her contemporaries – a new kind of woman: the first in her family to go to university, the first in generations to leave northern England for London, the first to take the Pill as an unmarried woman, the first to work alongside 'brazen' socialist feminists. Her romantic story has a happier ending than many, but she was also just one of thousands of people who for the first time had moved away, either figuratively or literally, from their social and family networks and turned to mediated matchmaking between 1970 and 2000.² Singles like Elaine faced an expanded field of businesses pitching solutions to their romantic status, from singles clubs to lonely hearts adverts to dating agencies. Indeed in the three decades preceding the rise of internet dating in Britain, matchmaking services proliferated sharply, not only cashing in on a swelling supply of singles resulting from soaring divorce rates and loosening in attitudes towards sex and marriage, but gaining visibility in print and on broadcast media.³ Matchmaking services in Britain were centuries-old, but had, since the matrimonial adverts of the 17th century, been both disparate and ephemeral.

¹Interview with Zoe Strimpel (ZS hereafter). Oral history interviews with ZS hereafter referred to simply as 'interview' unless further clarification needed, 13 April 2016, London.

²Mediated matchmaking is defined in this thesis as the search for dates via a paid-for third party.

³In Britain, the percentage of adults married at any one time fell from 65 in the mid-1960s to 53 in 2006. The 1970s saw the sharpest rise in divorce rates. 'Divorces in England and Wales, 2010', Office of National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_246403.pdf, p. 2 and Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self Control and Wellbeing in the United States and Great Britain since 1950* (Oxford, 2006), p. 336. Verifiable statistics representing numbers of matchmaking companies at any time during this period are unavailable, and this problem will be discussed in depth later on.

Ephemerality remained a defining feature, but it wasn't until the 1970s that commercial solutions to singleness began to form a critical mass. In one article on the subject in 1970, *The Daily Mail* noted that 'the lonely hearts business is booming as never before'.⁴ By 1992, one newspaper estimated that 130,000 people were using agencies, most of which had been set up since 1970, with a spike in the 1980s.⁵ In 2000, the British dating industry was estimated at a still relatively modest £50m but was attracting ever more extreme forecasts of growth, in line with rising numbers of single people.⁶

The dating industry in Britain in the three decades preceding the normalisation of internet dating – 1970-2000 – is the subject of this thesis. Despite its rapid growth both in real terms and visibility in this period, mediated dating remained a relatively uncommon method of finding a partner through the end of the 20th century. Based on the conservative figure above of 130,000 (not including those who placed or responded to lonely hearts adverts), only about 3 per cent of an unmarried population of around 6 million were using mediated dating. As will be discussed in more detail below, precise or reliable figures for how many people were actually using these services at any given time are not available. Moreover, there are inconsistencies in how 'single' was defined, since actual romantic status could be obscured by terms such as 'single person household', 'cohabitation' and 'unmarried'. However, the general reluctance surrounding the use of mediated dating is key to understanding the constitution of romance at this time. What kept people away from dating services, apart from possibly the price tag, was a lasting stigma around 'resorting' to paid-for interventions. These deterrents are explored in depth the analysis of first-person motivations in Chapter Four.

Mediated dating did not have the mass culture following in the period under study that it does today. But it was growing, and the discourse that flowed from its expansion and around (and from) its customers put a magnifying glass to on-the-ground experiences of changing gender dynamics. It also illuminated the challenges of self-articulation and self-presentation amid a romantic terrain that new sexual opportunities had hedged with ambiguity.

⁴'The Lonely Hearts Merry-Go-Round', *The Daily Mail*, 2 Nov 1970, p. 2.

⁵'Our eyes met across a small column', *The Guardian*, 31 Jan 2000, p. B6.

⁶'Warning for lonely hearts caught in the love trap by dodgy dating agencies', *The Guardian*, 26 September 1992, p. 34; 'Our eyes met across a small column', *The Guardian*.

The central contention of this thesis is that by studying mediated courtship, we gain a new window onto the very heart of change in late 20th century Britain –namely, the transformation of the gender order. Courtship lets us see how this transformation – normally studied in political, sexual, demographic or cultural terms – was played out in the everyday affective and social lives of individuals. Mediated dating demands the articulation of romantic hopes and self-perceptions that were (and are) heavily invested in the status of gender at any given time. It thus offers a privileged lens onto the question of how developments like Women’s Liberation discourse, the Pill and no-fault divorce shaped or reflected choices and experience on the individual level in the high-stakes arena of relational future. Deborah Cohen has recently suggested that contemporary British history must explore ‘how everyday actions...create new subjectivities as well as new forms of social action’.⁷ This thesis starts from the reverse point of view, asking how the social, political and cultural action that comprised sexual liberalisation and the expansion of feminist discourse were interpreted in the ‘everyday actions’ of individuals for whom these changes had immediate implications.

Cohen also foregrounded the importance of ‘charting the often quiet revolutions in attitudes and expectations’ that underlie broad historical change. This thesis probes the textures and perimeters of such a ‘revolution’ in understandings of gender and relationality in the post-1960s era. In so doing it owes a debt to the methods and concerns of historians interested in unpicking the relationship between gendered self-understanding and the state in wartime and post-war Britain.⁸ But it also offers something new by focussing on those outside of the ‘centre stage’ act of ‘the making and securing of... British family life’.⁹ As we will see, those who found themselves offstage either by choice or by chance were in the position of observers, with a heightened consciousness of the pressures on them either to pair up or to realise the opportunities that being single provided. The market that evolved to cater to their needs and incite their demand, and first-person experiences of romantic clienthood, offer the

⁷Deborah Cohen was responding directly to the Birmingham Modern British Studies Working Paper No. 1, 9 Oct 2014. <https://mbsbham.wordpress.com/2014/10/29/deborah-cohen-response-to-working-paper-no-1/>

⁸E.g. Penny Summerfield (2004), ‘Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews’, *Cultural and Social History* 1 (1), pp. 65-93; see also Mike Roper (2005), ‘Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History’, *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (1), pp. 57-73.

⁹Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 10.

historian something of a lightning rod through which the emotional, political and consumerist workings of romantic promise were conducted with peculiar directness.

In mapping fresh terrain in the study of late 20th century relational life, this thesis opens three new fronts in the study of modern British heterosexuality. The first offers a new perspective on the periodization and nature of conservatism and traditionalism in post-1960s British sexual life. The second concerns the emergence of a new type of emotional pragmatism. This was a subtle but significant shift in the affective norms linking self-understanding and romantic performance that normalised failure, and reshaped the courting self as a self-fashioned product that would succeed or ‘sell’ based on the effort – emotional, psychological, physical – put into it. And third, a new front is opened on the reading of romance in late 20th century Britain. Cultural scholars, including those interested in the wedding industry, have shown that despite sinking rates of marriage, romance remained a powerful imaginary among people living in 1970s, 80s and 90s Britain.¹⁰ This thesis, however, demonstrates something about the conditions in which romance could thrive – or not thrive – at this time. Mediated dating, in exposing the context of love’s production, was not compatible with the retention of romantic idealism, and produced a completely different set of approaches and understandings of the purpose of forming a couple. The following section outlines these three interventions in more detail. I will then turn to the wider historiographical context and this doctorate’s position within it.

Thesis interventions

A revolution in attitudes? The persistence of old feelings in new times

The advent, timing and extent of permissiveness has been widely debated. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, numerous books tackled the implications for British life of the ‘permissive society’ that had arrived at some point since 1959 – a term not limited to, but weighted towards the sexual. Since then, historians have continued to locate a dramatic loosening in norms around sexual culture, or sexual ‘revolution’ in the 1960s

¹⁰Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Romance Revisited* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), Sharon Boden, *Consumerism, Romance, and the Wedding Experience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

and 70s. Marwick pinpointed the late 60s as a time of clear transnational ferment, while Brian Harrison and Avner Offer have extended the chronology of ‘revolution’ into the 1990s, with Harrison calling the period between 1970 and 1990 one of ‘permanent’ sexual overhaul.¹¹ Yet contradictions abound in understandings of the pace, causes and substance of change in sexual morality and practice in the post-1960s period. Callum Brown locates in the 1960s the century’s key decade of sexual change, with single women’s sexual choices driving the final conquest of secularisation, while Hera Cook persuasively shows how contraceptive provision profoundly altered women’s sexual liberty in that decade.¹² But Frank Mort set out to ‘profoundly question the idea that the sexual regime of the 1960s was progressive’ while others also stress the persistence of conservative sexual morality in the 60s, including contemporaneous chroniclers such as Geoffrey Gorer, Michael Schofield and Alex Comfort.¹³ To some, meanwhile, the 1970s is seen as the watershed decade for the transformation in the gender order through new possibilities around women’s economic status, sex, sexuality and family structure.¹⁴ Others have seen a *tightening* in sexual morality in the first decade following universal provision of the Pill, abortion and no-fault divorce – Claire Langhamer, for instance, has pointed to a decreasing tolerance towards infidelity in the decade, while Pat Thane and Tanya Evans saw new types of institutionalised stigma directed at lone mothers in the 1980s and 1990s, arguments echoed by Ben Mechen in his assertion of a 1970s sexual regime restrictive in new ways.¹⁵

¹¹Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990, The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 209. For 1960s-70s ‘sexual revolution’ see also Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, 1958-1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, pp. 303-335; Callum Brown (2011), ‘Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman: the Importance of a “Short” Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the 1960s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2), pp. 189-215; Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, ‘The Benighted Decade?’, in Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 1-24.

¹²Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*; Brown, ‘Sex, Religion’.

¹³Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 5; Alex Comfort, *Sex In Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964); Michael Schofield, *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People* (London: Longmans, 1965); Geoffrey Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today* (London: Panther, 1973); more recently Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2012).

¹⁴E.g. Weeks, *Sex, Politics*, pp. 326-7; see also memoirists, e.g. Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2007).

¹⁵Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 170-179; Ben Mechen (2015), *Everyday Sex in 1970s Britain*, PhD Thesis, UCL.

These accounts are generally presented along strong empirical axes of either drastic change, or of lingering conservatism; of sudden rupture or of a *longue durée* in the evolution of sexual reform.¹⁶ Both understandings of sexual revolution, each stressing a wide array of evidence, are convincing. Yet this thesis attempts to get beyond the either/or interpretation of British society as either sexually permissive or surprisingly conservative after 1960. Clearly, one interlocutor for this approach, as well as for that of Mechen, Weeks and others, is the work of Michel Foucault. In linking greater sexual freedom with greater forms of constraint and control, Foucault prompted scholars to think about sexual liberalisation and the history of sexuality in terms of freshly restrictive ‘regimes’ and codes of normality and power. However, while the problematisation of sexual progress frames aspects of this thesis, the focus here is not on institutional forms of power *per se*; it is, rather, on the relationship between non-institutional discourse and individual response. In this it fits more within a newer historiography on experience, emotion and the everyday.¹⁷

In proposing to look beyond the ‘either/or’ approach to sexual change mentioned above, I have sought to integrate the two currents by focussing on the everyday micro-transactions of romance and singles’ articulations of amatory intent, placing them in dialogue with bigger patterns of discursive and behavioural change. In prioritising the micro, the textured and the everyday, I have taken my cue from historians keen to develop approaches for better understanding the ‘the long sexual revolution of the second half of the 20th century’ and the ‘global explosion of sexual possibilities’ that came with it.¹⁸ As these historians have stressed, we need to know more about the ‘everyday emotional lives’ and ‘day-to-day interactions’ buttressing the ‘sexual and emotional character’ of European nations right up to the millennium.¹⁹

One persuasive example of how the choices of individuals can be better scrutinised in terms not just of sex but of the social manifestations of sexual or romantic intent is to be found in the literature on Christianity and the sexual revolution. Influenced by Hera

¹⁶The *longue durée* argument is made in Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p. 5.

¹⁷For a discussion of departures from Foucault in modern British history, see Mechen, *Everyday Sex*, p. 23.

¹⁸Dagmar Herzog (2009), ‘Syncopated Sex: Transforming European Sexual Cultures’, *The American Historical Review*, 114 (5), pp. 1287-1308: 1295, and Weeks, *Politics*, p. 393.

¹⁹Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time Of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 3; Weeks, *Sex, Politics*, p. 393.

Cook's survey of British attitudes towards contraception since 1800, as well Callum Brown's work on secularisation and sex, historians such as Alana Harris, David Geiringer and Carmen Mangion have focussed on the experience of Catholics in 1960s Britain to show how individuals struggled to square personal value systems with new sexual possibilities.²⁰ This work has helped demonstrate the complex relationship between people and wider sexual politics and culture, and mitigated against the tendency among scholars of the 1960s and 1970s to 'downplay the significance of the *popular* sexual revolution' [my italics].²¹ Katherine Holden's more isolated study of single people between 1914 and 1960 is another good example of how the desires and choices of individuals can be set off against institutional change.²² This project is both temporarily and thematically distinct from the studies mentioned above. But with its reliance on first-person testimony and its close interest in the workings of a relatively small, cottage-style industry, it too tries to place the micro-interactions of individuals within the context of their 'everyday emotional lives'.²³

This thesis contributes another angle on the history of late 20th century liberalisation in Britain. While sexual behaviour changed in the ways demographers have shown, these changes were nonetheless buttressed by attitudes to gender that remained traditional, sometimes angrily so, producing new tensions between men and women that – as the century drew to an end – increasingly surfaced in TV, manuals, polemics and memoirs.²⁴ Marcus Collins' prominent history of British intimacy in the 20th century discussed these tensions in terms of 'sex war', while Jeffrey Weeks, Lesley Hall Avner Offer and others have acknowledged the persistence both of the monogamous ideal and

²⁰Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*; Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Brown (2011) 'Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman'; Alana Harris, *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-82* (Manchester: MUP, 2013); David Geiringer (2015), *The Pope and the Pill: Exploring the Sexual Experiences of Catholic Women in Post-War Britain*, PhD thesis, University of Sussex; Carmen Mangion, 'The "modern girl" and Catholic religious life, 1940-1970', Modern Religious History Seminar, Institute of Historical Research paper, 18 November 2015; Timothy Willem Jones (2013), 'Postsecular Sex? Secularisation and Religious Change in the History of Sexuality in Britain', *History Compass*, 11(11), pp. 918-930.

²¹Brown, 'Sex, Religion', p. 194.

²²Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: MUP, 2007).

²³McLellan, *Love*, p. 3.

²⁴For a conceptual consideration of these contradictions, and specifically the 'reification of monogamy', see Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2004), 'Sexual Antinomies in Late Modernity', *Sexualities* 7 (2), pp. 233-248.

of sexual inequality on a number of levels.²⁵ European scholars have thought more structurally, however, about the effects of rapid sexual change, with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim observing a ‘paradoxical [result]: the more equal the sexes seem, the more we become aware of persistent and pernicious inequalities between them’.²⁶

Sociologists and feminist thinkers have looked to love and romance as the theatre in which the dynamics of this paradox are played out, mining terrain that Europeanists including Josie McLellan and Dagmar Herzog have recently begun to explore historically.^{26a} Here I argue that British historians should follow suit, turning our attention to the particularities and contradictions of gender as it was hitched to love and vice versa in the final stretch of the 20th century.²⁷

In examining love, gender and romance, clarity of definition is important since the terms overlap. Although love now has its own multi-disciplinary literature, scholars often elide it with romance. I do the same here: any more serious engagement with love as distinct from romance must remain on the periphery of a thesis focussing on the history of romantic aspiration *outside* of an established couple.²⁸ Importantly, while the idea of finding love inevitably informed the way people articulated their hopes, the terms in which my subjects explained their choice to use matchmaking services were different. The desire for intimacy (another recurring term) – a flexible idea of closeness with a person of the opposite sex – was more dominant.

Joan Scott’s famous definition of gender is, I think, particularly useful for thinking about changes in dating since 1970, especially if we understand coupledness as a ‘social’

²⁵Weeks, *Politics*, pp. 395-405; Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change Since 1880* (London: Palgrave, 2000); Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Ed.), *Women in 20th Century Britain: Social, Cultural and Political Change* (London: Routledge, 2001); Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (Atlantic, 2001).

²⁶Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 14.

^{26a} McLellan, *Love In The Time of Communism*, Herzog, ‘Syncopated Sex’.

²⁷Other sociological treatments of this include Eva Illouz’s studies of romance under capitalism, e.g. *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013) and *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). Key feminist contributions on gender and love include Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Everyman, 1993); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001); Carol Ann Douglas, *Love and Politics: Radical Feminist and Lesbian Theories* (San Francisco: ISM Press, 1990), and the collection, esp Ti-Grace Atkinson, ‘Radical Feminism and Love’ (1972) in Susan Ostrov Weisser (Ed.), *Women and Romance: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

²⁸For an attempt to historicise love both as a feeling and as a set of rituals, see William Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900-1200 CE* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

as well as private relationship.²⁹ For Scott, gender is ‘a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and...a primary way of signifying relationships of power.’³⁰ And if, as Scott argues, power relationships between the sexes must be understood as invested with copious symbolic trappings, then dating – with the centrality of gift-exchange, delayed sexual gratification, chivalric etiquette and taboos of ‘easy’ women and unmasculine men – would seem particularly rich in gender clues. More broadly, however, gender is understood here as a dynamic system that provided the framework of meanings in which people pursued relationships, and that shaped people’s feelings and desires about what constituted an attractive romantic prospect. (I also use ‘sexual’ as in ‘sexual relationships’ or ‘sexual antagonism’ to do the same work as gender: namely, to indicate interactions or feelings harnessed to the sexual difference between men and women.)

If gender is one broad category of analysis central to this thesis, then romance is another cognate term used more specifically in conjunction with courtship and the activities, rituals and feelings that accompanied it. Susan Ostrov Weisser has emphasised the diversity of understandings of late 20th century romance, stressing the dominance of cultural, gender-political and commercial accounts.³¹ Of particular relevance here is the idea of romance as a form of specialness, with rituals and feelings that take people outside of the everyday and the humdrum.³² As will be discussed, the contest between the special and the everyday in mediated dating generated particular friction among my subjects. Moreover, Carol Dyhouse and Stephen Brooke have demonstrated that we also need to appreciate the centrality of culturally-stimulated imagination and fantasy if we are to historicise 20th century romantic sensibilities.³³ These feature narratives that weave between prudence and passion, with love at first sight, finding ‘the one’, and – sometimes – finding a man of fortune at the same time.³⁴ And Judy Giles has

²⁹Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’ (1986), *The American Historical Review*, 921 (5), pp. 1053-1075.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1067.

³¹Ostrov-Weisser, *Women and Romance*, pp. 1-9.

³²Eva Illouz, ‘The Lost Innocence of Love: Romance as a Post-Modern Condition’, in Mike Featherstone (Ed.), *Love and Eroticism* (London: Sage, 1999), pp. 161-187: 176.

³³Carol Dyhouse, *Hearthrobs: A History of Women and Desire* (Oxford: OUP, 2017); Stephen Brooke, ‘“A Certain Amount of Mush”: Love, Romance, Celluloid and Wax in the Mid-Twentieth Century’, in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-1970* (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 81-100.

³⁴For the prominence in the mid and late 20th century of romantic narratives featuring the ideal of ‘the one’, see Lucy Noakes, ‘“Sexing the Archive”: Gender in Contemporary History’, in Brian Brivati, Julia

highlighted the need to think historically about women's attitudes to romance, arguing that social and economic shifts in the interwar period encouraged working class women to reject romance.³⁵ The models of romance based on prudence on one hand and serendipity and passion on the other – did inform the rhetorics of the matchmakers studied here and sometimes structured the articulations of singles, but they fed through in complex, often muted, ways.

I use 'romance' and 'romantic' in three additional meanings: in an open-ended sense to refer to the feelings elicited by the courtship process; as a hoped-for future with someone (possibly as yet unknown); and the more transactional trappings of romance – eating out, dancing, drinking. Emotionally, then, romance here indicates a palette of hope, desire, disappointment and expectation (and the repetition of these feelings), while romance as a form of consumption – applied romance – is understood as key to the production of amorous feeling.³⁶ In sum, the term 'romance' is generally (though far from exclusively) used here to conjure an unstable constellation of actions, hopes, articulations and desires integral to dating in the period under scrutiny rather than as a synonym for a fixed romantic attachment.

By focussing on romance – as process and set of aspirations – we can elaborate a picture of sexual change more sluggish than the one that emerges from a historiography which, as I will discuss in more detail below, has tended to focus on sexual practice. We can also see more closely how traditional sexual morality – manifested in the desire for monogamous, committed, male breadwinner model relationships – expressed itself *in relation* to a growing plethora of sexual opportunity and women's equality discourse. The rhetorics of the matchmaking industry and the experiences and memories of daters themselves show that though the trappings of sexual change were fairly ubiquitous, romantically up-to-date impulses did not necessarily follow for men or women. In fact,

Buxton and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Contemporary History Handbook* (Manchester: MUP, 1996), pp. 74-83: 77; discussion in Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 165; Judy Giles (1992), "'Playing Hard to Get": Working-Class Women, Sexuality and Respectability in Britain, 1918-40', *Women's History Review*, 1 (2), pp. 239-255.

³⁵Judy Giles, "'You Meet 'Em and That's It': Working Class Women's Refusal of Romance Between the Wars in Britain', in Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Romance Revisited*, pp. 279-292.

³⁶Clearly, the determination of intimacy thresh-holds is one feature of courtship and, as Illouz has suggested, can be directly shaped by the ways in which romance is evoked. But sex – its first appearance within a relationship; contraception; sexual practice itself – is not the focus here, partly for historiographical reasons that will be explored in more depth further on.

feelings about intimacy and about the proper role of gender at the heart of intimacy could often move *against* new sexual opportunities. In thinking through this tension, I have found useful Dagmar Herzog's idea of syncopation in European sexual cultures.^{36a} Herzog uses the term to explain the conflicting moments of liberalisation in different European countries at any given time. Syncopation, or the idea of multiple speeds of change and retrenchment, is also suggestive of the ways in which individuals interpreted the new relational scaffolding of sex and gender in late 20th century Britain. A study of romance and courtship takes us beyond the physical encounters that surface in surveys about sex and family, and opens up a wider range of responses to 'sexual liberalisation' – including the delays and complexities that characterise the relationship between individual feeling and collective change.

Emotional pragmatism

Dating services represented a phenomenon that applied the practices and language of an increasingly market-oriented world to a domain in which self-worth was constantly being measured. This relationship between self, feeling, romance and the business of finding love requires some teasing apart.³⁷

Courtship has long lent itself to market metaphors, tied to the literal values of dowries, 'portions' or other marriage settlements.³⁸ But in the 1970s, an irony became more pronounced. For the first time for adults, indulging in courtship as a lifestyle or exploratory period rather than a route to marriage had become normal. The economic framework for courtship, while far from dissolved, as chapters Two and Four of th

^{36a}Herzog, 'Syncopated sex'.

³⁷In this thesis I use 'feelings' and 'emotion' interchangeably, and remain aware that 'affect', in contemporary scholarly usage, signals a pre-linguistic surge that may or may not lead to an expression of feeling, and which can therefore remain elusive to the historian. Nonetheless I also use 'affect' simply to indicate a domain of heightened feeling – e.g. that associated with the various stages of love. See discussion of these terms in Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 12, and Hera Cook, 'From Controlling Emotion to Expressing Feelings in Mid-Twentieth-Century England', *Social History*, 47 (3), pp. 627-646.

³⁸See, for instance, Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: MUP, 2002), and John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: OUP, 1985). In the early and middle 20th century in America, economic metaphors were mapped onto teen courtship less from the point of view as marriage as popularity and social worth. Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in 20th Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

thesis make especially clear, nonetheless became less formalised.³⁹ At the same time, new discourses from psychology, therapy, management and personal development were encouraging individuals to internalise market logics in new ways: namely to view themselves as work-in-progress products whose desirability (and options) were subject to refinement.⁴⁰ The romantic journey was increasingly being experienced as a figurative measure of worth, with worth defined less explicitly in financial, religious or class terms and more in the lexicon of emotional and sexual nouse or ‘technique’.⁴¹

Late 20th century romantic relationships have already been identified as a site in which people were expected to take responsibility for their failures and to improve, paying to help the process along with ‘psychoanalysts, psychologists, and therapists of all kinds, the publishing industry, television and numerous other media industries’.⁴² Yet generally the focus has been on the coupled aspect of love – marriage, relationships and their breakdown. Courtship, however, occupies its own space at the coalface of changes in emotional culture surrounding heterosexual intimacy in the post-1960s period. As singles saw more people, and a singles culture developed through newspapers, magazines, wine bars and singles clubs, rejection became increasingly allied not with the loss of an individual but with a process. And those who used dating agencies and placed personals ads, and who therefore went out on blind dates, were confronted in quite explicit ways with rejection and failure. As this study will suggest, these rejections came to signal the need to rethink self-presentation, expectations and attitude. The paradigm of pre-marital intimacy, then, began to echo the patterns assigned to the status of sex in the late 20th century. The idea that one should work to improve sexual performance for the sake of a relationship was not new.⁴³ But Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott’s more recent meditation on sexual ‘antinomies’ captures the sense of intensifying pressure to remake and update the sexual self as the century drew to a close. ‘Sex can

³⁹In this they were continuing trends that Claire Langhamer has illuminated in her studies of mid-century courtship, especially *The English in Love*.

⁴⁰Matthew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2006). See also Eva Illouz’s discussion of ‘the penetration of economics into the machinery of desire’ in the post-permissive era in *Why Love Hurts*, p. 58, and Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2003). For a further – though questionable – extension of the idea of marketplace logics in love, see Catherine Hakim, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

⁴¹Maurice North, *The Secular Priests* (London: Allen and Unwin), 1972, p.185.

⁴²Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 4.

⁴³Marie Stopes, *Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties* (London: Putnam, 1933), Paul Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013).

no longer be taken for granted, rather it must be constantly improved upon in the pursuit of perfection....to be bad at sex is almost to fail as a human being...both sex and the relationship itself [have] become projects to be worked at and worked upon'.⁴⁴

The only thing potentially worse than dysfunctional sex and relationships was to have neither, and yet those without have remained marginal to the historical agenda of the period, an omission that will be returned to below. This thesis observes the way those outside of relationships, and quite often those without sexual options, experienced the pressure to remake and rework themselves in order to gain those things. It brings to light the ways in which that work required a new form of emotional pragmatism in the approach to finding intimacy. This rationalism of feelings helped singles navigate the increasingly widespread confrontation between the commodification of the process of mate-seeking, and that of themselves as the industry's frontline products. Inevitably there was discomfort with combining the search for love with the profiteering of matchmakers. But market conditions – in terms of both the romantic options open to single British men and women in a demographic sense and demand and supply at work within mediated dating services themselves – meant a growing number of singles were having to get used to this combination. How they did, the focus in Chapter Four, opens up a moment in the history of modern romance that not only reveals the way the emotional culture around intimacy was changing at the time, but also how the affective terrain of contemporary digital dating was developing before the internet was even invented.

Intimacy and the business of romance

Chapter One of this thesis explores the cultural and social frame in which the dating industry expanded in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, while the third chapter maps the flashpoints in the media's construction of the industry and in how a range of onlookers perceived it. In both chapters, the importance of sexual relationships and their correct handling is stressed, ideas promoted in different ways depending on who was speaking – journalist, psychologist, or matchmaking entrepreneur. A desire to find 'the one' hovers around these conversations and debates, of course. Yet the yearning for romance

⁴⁴Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, 'Sexual Antinomies in Late Modernity', pp. 241 and 242.

was generally codified rather than explicit in the ever-thickening picture of desired outcomes, taking shape instead in concepts of emotional and physical fulfilment. This opacity around romance – at least in its popular representation as a fast-growing physical and spiritual chemistry sacralised with gifts – is even more pronounced in the personal testimonies of Chapter Four.⁴⁵ While the ‘architecture of choice’ informing my subjects’ relational quest was generally underpinned by monogamous hopes of meeting one lifelong partner, the picture that emerges lacks idealised imaginaries of love at first sight or wealthy knights in shining armour.⁴⁶ Singles favoured instead a concern with good manners, personal compatibility and financial accountability.⁴⁷ Acknowledging this helps illuminate the relationship between the procedures of romance and romantic sentiment at a juncture in which the two were yoked together in ever more ambiguous and close-knit ways. Rather than fantasy, the psychic domain traditionally allied to romance, my subjects stressed the desire to find someone who was honest, decently attired, financially independent, good company and able and willing to commit. Partner specifications were concrete and realistic, with little mention, as I alluded to earlier, of ‘falling in love’. Crucially, however, the experience of mediated dating – which laid bare the machinations not only of the matchmaking business and its profit model, but also of the minutiae of economically-loaded interactions with strangers – pushed uncomfortably against romance understood as a ‘dramatized, intense’ experience *outside* of everyday life, dominated by feelings rather than rationality.⁴⁸

In his work on the meanings of domestic space (houses) as a site of romantic attachment and fantasy, Joe Moran has argued that the modern British romanticisation of home is only possible by denying ‘its more quotidian realities’.⁴⁹ Moran, echoing Bachelard, noted that the ‘mundane everydayness of the house’ remained unacknowledged because of its ‘ideological’ otherness from the dreary public spaces of everyday life.⁵⁰ Even if homes were mass produced, or the same as the rest on the street or development, they

⁴⁵The best unpicking of the conflicting messages around romance directed at women in the late 20th century is still Janice Winship, *Inside Women’s Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987).

⁴⁶Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 59.

⁴⁷Langhamer and Dyhouse have emphasized that in mid-century romance storylines, true love and pragmatism often went together, especially in stories concerned with bagging a rich *and* handsome man. Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p. 52; Dyhouse, *Heartthrobs*.

⁴⁸Illouz, ‘The Lost Innocence’, p.178.

⁴⁹Joe Moran (2004), ‘Housing, Memory and Everyday Life in Contemporary Britain’, *Cultural Studies*, 18 (4), pp. 607-627: 608.

⁵⁰Ibid.

were seen as refuges from the mass produced sameness of the public built environment. Yet this otherness was only achieved through fairly heavy ‘symbolic work’ made possible by the entanglement of domestic space ‘with a logic of privatized consumption’.⁵¹

These relationships are highly suggestive for the way we think more widely about sentimental attachments in late 20th century Britain. Regarding perhaps the most sentimental of all – romance – this thesis suggests that in failing to conceal the ‘mundane everydayness’ of love in its earliest stages, commercially-mediated dating – with its forms, questionnaires, payment and logistics – stacked the odds against clients.⁵² Chapter Four elucidates how this visibility of the context of production in which singles found themselves as both client and product threatened the romantic project as much or more than bad dates. The ‘logics of privatised consumption’ may have allowed homeowners to forget the context of production in which their private unit was built next to dozens or hundreds more like it, through refurbishment projects and almost silent new appliances concealing the work of cleaning or rubbish disposal. Yet these logics of consumption posed serious problems for those actually trying to be consumers – ie paying customers – of romance, demanding of them a perplexing and effortful task. This task was the triangulation of the commoditisation of the process, commoditisation of themselves (as the industry’s products), and the development of amorous feeling. As singles struggled to reconcile these factors, their approach to coupling jettisoned the vocabularies of romantic longing and took on a day-by-day, experimentalist outlook that would come to underpin contemporary digital dating. Much has been written about the marketization of private life and specifically of romantic life, a literature whose relevant aspects will be discussed further on. Yet when we look at romantic intent as it was actually mediated by a market – not a figurative market but an industry – we see in the experience and conceptualisation of romance a high degree of resistance to the logics of consumption. Romance – despite becoming increasingly allied to paid-for leisure in an implicit sense – was not, in fact, easily convertible into loving feeling when it was hedged by the explicit workings of cost benefit analysis.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²For a brilliant account of the mediation of private life through economic forces in the American context, see Arlie Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Research context

This thesis clearly falls within the remit of ‘contemporary’ British history. Although the field has been singled out for the fragmentariness of its historiography, as well as for its erstwhile focus on politics and policy, historians of the post-1945 period do share some key research elements.⁵³ These include the challenges and opportunities afforded by living historical subjects and the interpretive pressures unique to events that took place within living memory.⁵⁴ Also incumbent on contemporary historians is a lively engagement with present problems and trends. In this thesis I have made use of all three aspects: the living sources, the remembered era and the memories it generates, and also – with more literalness perhaps than other late 20th century scholars – the eye on the present. With regard to the latter, my engagement with this part of the contemporary historical framework follows, ironically, the urging of a Medievalist. Marc Bloch, writing in 1941 and 1942, recommended historians of all times ‘first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken’.⁵⁵

The thinking that led to this thesis, and indeed to my becoming a historian, began with an MPhil thesis I completed in 2013 about British women’s experience of internet dating, in which I was struck not only by the centrality of the process in their lives but by the complexity and reach of the issues that radiated out from it. The tensions thrown up by my internet dating study seemed to require further investigation. However, it became clear as my project drew to an end that online dating in all its aspects was attracting voluminous amounts of attention across the social and psychological sciences.⁵⁶ Therefore, without plunging further into theory or numbers, neither of which I found satisfying methods for studying the subjective and relational, it would have been hard to contribute substantively to understandings of digital dating. Another problem

⁵³Modern British Studies at Birmingham Working Paper No. 1 (2014), p. 3.

www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/history/mbs/MBS-Birmingham-Working-Paper-1.pdf.

⁵⁴Harriet Jones, Kjell Östberg and Nico Randeraad (eds), *Contemporary History on Trial* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), especially Peter Mandler, ‘The Responsibility of the Historian’, pp. 12-27; for an overview of the large literature on oral history as a key tool for contemporary historians, see Michael Roper, ‘Oral History’, in *Contemporary History Handbook*, pp. 345-365.

⁵⁵Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, (Manchester: MUP, 1992 [1949]), p. 46.

⁵⁶For an overview, see William Dutton, ‘The Study of Online Relationships and Dating’, in William Dutton (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) and for up to date research, I. Alev Degim, James Johnson and Tao Fu (eds), *Online Courtship – Interpersonal Interactions Across Borders* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2016).

was that online dating is still unfolding. Thus while there are already clear histories to be discerned even within the last five years of digital dating, such as the move from desktop to mobile services, it is too early to be able evaluate the broader social significance of online dating in Britain. By contrast, the earlier but still recent period in mediated dating between 1970 and 2000 appeared riper for social analysis, falling between the well-explored matrimonial press of the Edwardian and interwar period, the marriage bureaux of the 1940s and 1950s, and the rise of the Web. The dust had settled on its novelties and norms, allowing it both speak to contemporary developments but remain distinct.

I also wanted to test assumptions about internet dating as a discrete phenomenon, one that has reinvented the norms and practices of searching for a partner. Contemporary digital dating has attracted extreme analyses. To Nancy Jo Sales, an editor and writer at *Vanity Fair*, its web app form constitutes ‘dating apocalypse’.⁵⁷ Other commentators, such as Michael Norton, a psychologist at Harvard Business School, call our era ‘one of the first times in human history there was some innovation’ in one of ‘the biggest problems that humans face’.⁵⁸ Undoubtedly digital technology has completely changed the appurtenances and affordances of matchmaking via a third party. The lonely hearted no longer need to arrange subscriptions to services by post or phone, or write laborious letters by pen. Now they can instantaneously access a roulette table of geographically-convenient options for free on their Facebook-enabled smartphone apps. But as this thesis demonstrates, the assumption of total rupture on a social level hides the way in which digital matchmaking fits within a longer history of mediated dating, in which the methods of matching have constantly interacted with social dynamics both new and old. Wrenching apart the new from the old conceals important sites of continuity in the transition from older technologies and practices of dating to more recent ones. It is too often assumed that the rise of digital dating signifies year zero in mediated dating. This thesis is an attempt to place the current period of matchmaking in a spectrum of older technologies, practices and discourse, while also showing what is unique in the preceding period.

⁵⁷Nancy Jo Sales, ‘Tinder and the Dawn of the Dating Apocalypse’, *Vanity Fair*, Sep 2015.

⁵⁸‘Online dating? Swipe left’, *The Financial Times*, 12 Feb, 2016. www.ft.com/content/b1a82ed2-8e34-11e5-8be4-3506bf20cc2b.

Dominant narratives: the primacy of sex and sexuality

I introduced earlier the contributions this study makes to understandings of gender and romance in late 20th century Britain, particularly through its attempts to explore the relationships between sexual change, romantic feeling and selfhood; and between individual experience, feeling and broad empirical change. In doing so I suggested that while historians have written extensively about sexual liberalisation from within a number of interpretative frameworks, there is a need for more analysis of the emotional and social aspects of intimacy. Here I want to elaborate on this need in relation to the wider historiography of intimacy in 20th century Britain, and offer some reasons why courtship has so far been left out of studies of the later part of the century. Earlier I suggested that romantic experience enabled me to think in new ways about sex and gender. In the following set of reflections, I discuss the case of courtship more specifically.

Clearly, the present study relates to numerous established avenues of scholarship in modern British history, including love, sexuality, permissiveness, technology, and consumerism. Nevertheless, heterosexual courtship, of which mediated dating forms a distinct part, represents an intriguing gap in the historiography of late 20th century British private life. Neither courtship in general nor dating services in particular have garnered the sole attention, before now, of any published study of post-1960s Britain. In stark contrast, in the social sciences and psychology, dating and mate selection have ‘for several decades’ been ‘cornerstones of research’ with research into partner choice and love accruing since the 1960s.⁵⁹ Why have historians been so reticent about dating and its place within the wider social topography of love and sex? Why has mediated dating in the late twentieth century garnered no attention at all? This section suggests several possible reasons, not to elevate my work by implying other historians have been blind, but because the topic’s historiographical neglect raises issues germane to the positioning of the present study. In the following pages, I focus on two broad areas of difficulty: first, the conceptual and second, the archival.

⁵⁹Catherine Surra and Christine Gray, ‘From Courtship to Universal Properties: Research on Dating and Mate Selection, 1950 to 2003’, in Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 113-131.

Conceptually, the first issue is to do with historical context, and the privileging of the dominant narratives of the period. Dating is the antechamber to the more obviously structural normative changes in sexual culture in post-1960s Britain: sexual practice, marriage and reproduction. It also appears secondary to the grand narratives of sexual revolution and the politicisation of sex. Given the dominance of such events, dating in this period has perhaps been prey to a syndrome formerly suffered by love, whose historical treatment was as late as 1992 described as ‘an interruption in the course of important events’.⁶⁰ Despite the fact that courtship is the arena in which intimacy thresholds are tested, the historicisation of post-1960s affective life is relatively recent, and its key narratives have not so far found a place for dating as a distinct phenomenon.

Rather than consider the way individuals articulated and pursued romantic visions against the backdrop of sharp sexual change, social historians have focussed on the major legislative, demographic and cultural changes surrounding sex and marriage, including the acceptance of no-fault divorce, the free universal provision of contraception, the ‘unprecedented’ rise of cohabitation and single parent households and the withdrawal of censorship laws.⁶¹ The richness of survey material has further boosted the empirical tendency of this work.⁶² Meanwhile, a key manifestation of scholarly response to the sexual-political upheaval of the 1960s, 1970s and – with the rise of AIDS – the 1980s, is to be found in the discipline of sociology, which continues to reinforce the link between politics, demography and sexual practice. Indeed, in line with testing assumptions about the rise of permissiveness and sexual liberation, as discussed above, historians have paid closer attention to all aspects of sexual practice than to its chaster social counterpart of courtship.⁶³ Sex has rightly been placed at the forefront of understandings of change in the period; as Rosalind Brunt reflected (albeit with feminist

⁶⁰Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 1, cited in Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 67.

⁶¹Indispensable in this vein is Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*, esp. pp. 265-346; Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners?*

⁶²See publication of the first National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-1) in 1990; also studies like Michael Murphy (2000), ‘The evolution of cohabitation in Britain, 1960-95’, *Population Studies*, 54 (1), pp. 43-56; Jane Lewis and Kathleen Kiernan (1996), ‘The Boundaries Between Marriage, Nonmarriage, and Parenthood: Changes in Behavior and Policy in Postwar Britain’, *Journal of Family History*, 21 (3), pp. 372-87, esp. p. 373.

⁶³Also importantly, historians of post-war London have used a capital-centric idea of permissiveness suggested in the term ‘swinging city’, e.g. Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs* and Richard Hornsey, *The Spiv and The Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010). See also Jerry White, *London in The Twentieth Century: A City and Its People* (London: Vintage, 2008).

irony) in a 1982 essay on 'permissive' 1970s sex advice, "'sex' is the new gateway to an exciting life and the final bestower of individual identity and absolute meaning.'⁶⁴ Moreover, historians of intimacy in London such as Frank Mort, Richard Hornsey and Jerry White have also framed their studies within the idea of a 'swinging' city. The sexual turn in 1960s and 1970s Britain has also attracted scholars of gender, with women's newly prominent sexuality at the centre of analysis, representative of forces coercive as well as liberatory. Even heterosexual pornography was 'much concerned with women's emancipation'.⁶⁵

Cultural historians in particular have made use of the growing body of erotic material in print and on screen to explore sex in the period and to test the meaning and timing of permissiveness.⁶⁶ Often, the meanings of such cultural products have been evaluated through the debates of the intelligentsia and media commentary rather than through the responses of their consumers.⁶⁷ There is little equivalent in the post-1970 era of the efforts of social historians of film and music such as Annette Kuhn, Jeffrey Richards and Adrian Horn, or scholars of popular magazines and romance novels and films like Carol Dyhouse, to tease out the lived and imaginative responses of ordinary people to 'permissive' artefacts.⁶⁸ The same applies in areas of cultural analysis concerned with the interplay between feminist and traditional messages: Janice Winship's important study of women's magazines in the 1970s and 1980s, which now sits among a wide

⁶⁴Brunt, Rosalind, "'An Immense Verbosity': Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970s', in Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan (eds), *Feminism, Culture and Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), pp. 143-170: 144; *The Permissive Society: The Guardian Inquiry* (London: Panther Modern Society, 1969).

⁶⁵Marcus Collins (1999), 'The Pornography of Permissiveness: Men's Sexuality and Women's Emancipation in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 47, pp. 99-120: 100; Lesley Hall, *Gender and Social Change*; see Ben Mechen's commentary on Alex Comfort, *Everyday Sex*, pp. 151-254.

⁶⁶Marcus Collins, 'Introduction', in Marcus Collins (Ed.), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007), pp. 1-40; David McGillivray, *Doing Rude Things: The History of the British Sex Film, 1957-81* (London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1992); Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre, 1955-1965* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Joseph McAleer, *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* (Oxford: OUP, 1999). Beyond Britain, see, for instance, Elizabeth D. Heineman (2006), 'The Economic Miracle in the Bedroom: Big Business and Sexual Consumption in Reconstruction West Germany,' *Journal of Modern History*, 78 (4), pp. 846-877.

⁶⁷Mechen defends his choice to focus on 'discourse' rather than experience rigorously but not entirely convincingly, in *Everyday Sex*, p. 42.

⁶⁸Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: IB Taurus, 2002); Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (London: IB Taurus, 2010); Adrian Horn, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945-60* (Manchester: MUP, 2009); Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History and Feminism* (London: Zed, 2010) and *Hearththrobs*.

scholarship of such journals, focuses squarely on content rather than reception.⁶⁹ Work on youth and popular culture, however, has been keener to explore the experience of audiences.⁷⁰

This thesis is interested in the complexity of sexual liberalisation – in gender politics as well as attitudes to physical intimacy – as it was interpreted by a heterogeneous group of single adults. I have therefore tried to ‘listen’ for the ways it cropped up in debate among singles themselves, informing their view of the romantic landscape, as well as in the moral articulations of various media. This task seemed particularly pressing in relation to ‘ordinary’ adults, the very people whose experience generally remains unpublished as memoir or analysis. Unsurprisingly, more is known about how certain feminists, musicians and broadcasters experienced the romantic landscape in the 1960s and 1970s than about how someone like Elaine did.⁷¹ Such memoirs add vivid colour to the period but produce a bias towards London-based experience played out within the worlds of activism, politics, culture and the media. Unsurprisingly, little light is shed in these accounts on the everyday experience of unwanted singleness nor on perceptions of the pressure to pair up. People of sufficient renown to write memoirs tend to have had busy if turbulent love lives, whereas the people whose experience informs this thesis faced the more mundane hardships of singleness, including financial struggle and social isolation.

Moving to the 1980s, a different set of historiographical concerns have emerged around the sexual contradictions of the Thatcher period, ranging across family and sexual policy, the campaigns of the moral right, and the motif of sexual consumerism. Jon Lawrence has argued that Thatcher unleashed a ‘radical transformation’ throughout all levels of British culture more extreme even than the permissiveness of the 1960s or

⁶⁹Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines*. Representation rather than reception was the key theme at a recent women's magazines conference, ‘Consuming/Culture: Women and Girls in Print and Pixels’, Oxford Brookes University, 5-6 June 2015.

⁷⁰E.g. Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1991), Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992).

⁷¹E.g. Sara Maitland, *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960's* (London: Virago, 1988); Joan Bakewell, *The Centre of the Bed* (Bath: BBC Audio Books, 2004); Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble*; Molly Parkin, *Moll: The Making of Molly Parkin: An Autobiography* (London: Gollancz, 1993); Viv Albertine, *Clothes Clothes Music Music Music Boys Boys Boys* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

militancy of the 1970s.⁷² The focal point was a ‘radical individualism’ that permeated private as well as public life.⁷³ Individualism and consumerism were linked with new intensity in this period. As Frank Mort has suggested, a sharp emphasis on market economics promoted slippage of a consumerist ethic into private domains, with sexual identity becoming both a good itself, and dependent on cultures of stylized consumption.⁷⁴ Chancellor Nigel Lawson’s 1988 budget marked a moment, according to Mort, when ‘consumption featured as a whole way of life’ and Mort goes on to show, through the construction of topographically-rooted London masculinities, the ways in which consumption in ‘theory and in practice existed in a complex, but interconnected, relationship.’⁷⁵ Sociologists took up the idea of an ethic of panoramic consumption with gusto, seeing in it a picture of general post-industrial Western emotional decline. Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens and Eva Illouz offered theories of throwaway ‘liquid’ relationships, cloakroom communities (also disposable), and a new fungibility of interpersonal relationships.⁷⁶

Historians of the decade have pointed to a range of factors that contribute to this reading. These include the raft of new men’s magazines promoting the objectification of women alongside an aggressive model of masculine consumerism, a proliferation of pornographic material boosted through technologies like the video tape, new urban zones of male sexual consumption and the collapse of feminist cohesion over the issue of pornography.⁷⁷ And in her damning study of Anglo-American feminist backlash, Susan Faludi mapped the ways in which manufacturers and the media, navigating the cut-throat retail climate of the 1980s, engineered, steered and reinforced misogynist models of gender and relationships.⁷⁸ In the political domain, contemporaneous studies by Beatrix Campbell, Stuart Hall and Martin Durham put in place a critical framework

⁷²Jon Lawrence, ‘Paternalism, Class, and the Path to Modernity’, in Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds.), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 174-165: 163.

⁷³Ibid., p. 164.

⁷⁴Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Commerce, Masculinities and Social Space* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 2 and 3.

⁷⁶See Bauman on cloakroom communities in *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 199-202; Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*; Illouz explores fungible relationships in *Cold Intimacies*, p. 109.

⁷⁷Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption*; Collins, *Modern Love*.

⁷⁸Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1993).

for considering the Thatcher government's vision of family and motherhood, and that of non-governmental, anti-permissiveness pressure groups.⁷⁹ More recent work by Christopher Moores and Laura Beers has analysed specific sites of interaction between small-c and big-C conservatism, women and sexual politics in the 1980s.⁸⁰ Although it is uninterested in courtship, by demonstrating the linked nature of sex, politics and economics in the 1980s, this literature offers a flexible frame for the sexual debates – themselves wide-ranging – that animated singles in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Sexuality and the city

Homosexuality, like sex and permissiveness, is another magnet for scholars of late 20th century British intimacy and, predictably, its attractions have further accentuated the negation of heterosexual courtship, while endowing would-be scholars of the latter with a rich and instructive literature. The ironic effect of this literature, though, is that the historiography of late 20th century British relationships has had less to say about heterosexual experience, still the dominant form, than of marginalised sexual cultures.⁸¹ Drawn to the intellectual challenge posed by the encodedness of desire, historians of homosexuality have worked to uncover the volumes spoken by different types of silence. An expanding body of work tells us ever more about post-war queer life in terms of, to name just a few areas, the intimate topographies of post-war European cities; religious communities; media and literature; and the cultural politics of gay pornography.⁸² An irony underpinning the relative scarcity of historical work on 20th

⁷⁹Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London: Virago, 1987); Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988); Martin Durham, *Sex and Politics: The Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

⁸⁰Chris Moores, (2014), 'Opposition to the Greenham Women's Peace Camps in 1980s Britain: RAGE Against the 'Obscene'', *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (1), pp. 204-227; Laura Beers, 'Thatcher and the Women's Vote', in Robert Saunders and Ben Jackson (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), pp. 113-132. See also work linking gay activism and governmental and popular perception of AIDS in the decade: Matt Cook, 'AIDS and Mass Observation', Mass Observation podcasts, 97, www.massobs.org.uk/podcasts/97-matt-cook-aids-and-mass-observation; Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain: How The Personal Got Political* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

⁸¹Queer historians have framed their scholarship in terms of social exclusion e.g. Patrick Higgins, *The Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996); see also Stanley Cohen (Ed.), *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance and the Mass Media* (London: Constable, 1993). Simon Srežter and Kate Fisher make the same point in relation to the historiography of the early and mid-20th century, in *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 46.

⁸²Matt Cook and Jennifer V Evans (eds), *Queen Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe Since 1945* (Bloomsbury, 2014); Brian Lewis (Ed.), *British Queer History, New Approaches and Perspectives* (Manchester: MUP,

century heterosexual life (outside of marriage and prostitution) is that the accepted languages of heterosexual romance have taken place in plain view. The challenge, then, is not to excavate the experiences of straight singles below the text, but to find it despite, or amid, the din of the discourse surrounding heteronormative coupling. Laura Doan's observation that 'the history of straightness is not straightforward because heterosexuality begins life as a social norm' is apt, further hinting at why 'hetero-relations' may have slipped through the net.⁸³

But the historian of heterosexual intimacy can learn much from recent queer histories three central ways. First, through their close studies of male love, historians such as Matt Houbrook and Harry Cocks have demonstrated the fine-grained intermixture of the external and internal factors that compose sexual and romantic behaviour and experience. As Matt Cook has observed, the 'various homoerotic possibilities' of late 19th century London were enmeshed equally in the physical infrastructure of the city and in the conceptual network of 'ideas about homosexuality'.⁸⁴ Too often, as I have suggested, post-war historians of intimacy have focused on institutional, cultural and discursive debates, rather than the lived social and material experiences of heterosexual relationship formation. Second, the historiography of queer British life also set in place a fruitful mode of thinking about sexual status, including that of heterosexual singletons, in which the subject is unfixed, shaped by varying aspects of everyday life.⁸⁵ And finally, as Harry Cocks has argued, recent historiographies of homosexuality alert us to the centrality of continuity, rather than rupture, in stories of sexual change over time.

Urban life, in particular, has emerged as a unifying theme of much of this literature, since cities are the setting in which sexual subcultures navigated the twin peaks of pleasure and danger, stoking and evading scandal and arrest. This interest has continued

2013); Matt Bunzl, *Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late-Twentieth Century Vienna* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (London: Palgrave, 2014); Geoffrey Chauncey, 'Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets' in Joel Saunders (Ed.), *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), pp. 224-267.

⁸³Laura Doan, 'A peculiarly obscure subject' in Brian Lewis (Ed.), *British Queer History*, pp. 87-109: 91-92.

⁸⁴Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

⁸⁵Harry Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century* (London: IB Taurus, 2003), p. xviii.

into contemporary sociology and geography, where analysts – attracted by Bourdieu's theory of habitus – have mapped gay urban 'fields'.⁸⁶ As queer scholars have demonstrated, the city was integral in shaping homosexuality in the 19th and 20th centuries.

But the city also has important ramifications for heterosexual relations. In particular, commercial matchmaking, with its anonymity and scope for dissimulation, can be read 'as one of the telling signs which enabled the interpretation and negotiation of modern urban life'.⁸⁷ In more pragmatic terms it also promised to counter post-Industrial Revolution rootlessness among the working and lower middle classes that was particularly acute in big cities. As a setting for blind dates, London had particular potential. Scholars of cosmopolitanism and sexuality have highlighted the city's distinct place in the development of social and sexual trends throughout the 20th century, noting its 'sexual exceptionalism'.⁸⁸ Seen as the nation's moral epicentre into the 1960s, the sexual scandals of the metropolis were watched particularly closely by moral campaigners, reformers, politicians and the police.⁸⁹ Viewed discursively, at the very least, the city – with its 'brighter lights' and 'later hours', its alleyways and drinking dens – has since the advent of electricity been an exciting place for romantic assignations.⁹⁰ Historians of gender and the city have also tracked how elites – aristocrats and Bohemians – pushed sexual boundaries in demarcated cosmopolitan zones like Soho, while a third has focussed on red light districts.⁹¹ Taken together, the interest in cities, and London in particular, has centred on the workings of urban environments to conceal and enable marginal or illegal sexual practices, both heterosexual and homosexual.

⁸⁶Adam Green, *Sexual Fields: Toward A Sociology of Collective Sexual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Andrew Tucker, *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity, and Interaction in Cape Town* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009).

⁸⁷Harry Cocks (2004), 'Peril in the Personals: The Dangers and Pleasures of Classified Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century Britain', *Media History*, 10 (1), pp. 3-16: 1.

⁸⁸Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p. 52; Judith Walkowitz's study of Soho, *City of Dreadful Delight*, locates the political foment of that district in the nexus of new media, immigrant groups and new modes of performance. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Richard Hornsey's description of sexuality in 1930s London, in terms of the 'moral uncertainty' conferred by the 'young and rootless individuals' of the working class who had appeared in formerly genteel parts of the city. *The Spiv and The Architect*, p. 6.

⁸⁹Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p. 8.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹E.g Phil Hubbard, *Sex and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West* (Aldershot: Ashgate: 1999).

However, what is missing in this literature is how mainstream heterosexual people navigated the city as they pursued not prostitutes, pornography stashes or cottaging opportunities, but the sexually conventional, primarily social activity of heterosexual courtship. The type of Londoners for whom, in the 1890s, ‘the public-house bar’ and ‘the streets’ – sites of ‘bona fide honest acquaintance[ship]’ rather than ‘illicit intercourse’ – were the main methods of meeting.⁹² Using the terminology of de Certeau, how did ‘users’ of the city appropriate its institutional and discursive forms for their own romantic ends?⁹³ As the 20th century advanced did the city provide the same horizon of possibility for ordinary people looking for a romantic connection without sexual commitment, or did it become something else, a geographically sprawling locale whose main attractions were too exclusive or expensive to access fully? And what kind of options did singles have outside of cities?

While London is a focal point, this thesis is also an attempt to move beyond the metropolis, with attention to the difference settings in which daters operated both in and out of cities. London was far from being the only home of introduction agencies or lonely hearts advertising nor, more importantly, of the people who needed such services. Moreover, in prioritising romantic rather than sexual intent, this study avoids assumptions about the centrality of metropolitanism in the dating choices of singletons. London was undoubtedly a key site for the rolling out of the dating industry after 1970, and the centre of dating discourse inasmuch as it was produced in London-based newspapers. But as one of my key sources, *Singles* magazine, as well as my first-person testimonies reveal, the development of mediated dating and single subjecthood after 1970 should be viewed with sensitivity to nationwide as well as local dynamics of demand.

Moreover, romance invites consideration not just from the perspective of geographical location but of space too. As Stephen Brooke, Claire Langhamer and James Nott and have stressed recently, British courtship in the middle of the 20th century was

⁹²WT Stead (1887), ‘In the city of dreadful solitude: a plea for a matrimonial bureau’ *Review of Reviews*, p. 155.

⁹³Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

inseparable from the spaces in which it took place: the physical ones of the cinema and dance hall, and the imaginative arenas of film and music.⁹⁴ Yet after the demise of the dance hall and the loosening of strictures around the meeting of men and women, romance became unpenned, spilling into a wider variety of consumption-oriented spaces. These spaces could be private, public or informal, varying in kind according to the affluence and age of the daters, both of which broadly increased after the 1960s in line with economic and demographic trends including delayed marriage and rising divorce rates.⁹⁵ As the sources consulted in this thesis make clear, singles in the 70s and 80s no longer went dancing under the eye of chaperones but increasingly met, canoodled, ate, drank, and had sex together in the context of bars, gigs, restaurants and home. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to track such spatially, sexually and socially sprawling experiences. My approach of focussing on the dating industry, its media and its customers is intended to help mitigate this problem by delimiting the sphere of study. This has allowed me to track its contours with some precision through attention to dates themselves (e.g. restaurants and bars) and the spaces in which they were brokered, such as lonely hearts pages and agency offices.

Despite adopting a tentative stance towards the implicit connection between lonely hearts and cities that characterises scholarship of earlier periods, this study nonetheless keeps sight of several London-specific features. First is the fact that the 1970s and 80s saw a major expansion in leisure opportunities in the capital, covered extensively in a new listings and review press of which *Time Out*, founded 1968, was the most famous. The more than ‘530 rock, folk and jazz’ venues in place by 1986, the numerous wine bars that proliferated in the 1970s and countless new restaurants were all conducive to dating as well as for meeting people.⁹⁶ Intensifying gentrification linked to a heating property market and the expansion of London’s financial district following deregulation in 1986 also changed the romantic leisure possibilities in terms of places and people. These factors, however, have not emerged as prominent features of this study. More central is of the role of consumption and economic power, also established themes for historians of London, in shaping attitudes to mediated courtship. Finally, the motif of

⁹⁴James Nott, *Going to the Palais: A Social And Cultural History of Dancing and Dance Halls in Britain, 1918-60* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Stephen Brooke, “‘A Certain Amount of Mush’”; Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p. 13.

⁹⁵Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p. 183.

⁹⁶The journalist Michael Elliott quoted in Jerry White, *London in The Twentieth Century*, p. 347.

London as a uniquely lonely place, a ‘city of dreadful solitude’ reached into the advertising literature of dating agencies through the 1990s.⁹⁷ This was not the solitude of a frequenter of nightspots luxurious or seedy, but more that of the ‘student in London lodgings’ with the ‘loneliness of the lodging; the terrible silence of the room’ causing one to escape to the streets ‘where at least there was movement and noise’.⁹⁸

Before turning to the specific archival challenges of heterosexual courtship, let me sum up the spirit of this thesis as treated so far. Writing in 2008, Martin Francis reflected that

A dramatic growth of interest in the history of sexuality in modern Britain has aggravated, rather than ameliorated [the problem of a shared scholarly vocabulary of love]. We now know much more about the intimate physical experiences of Britons in the last century than we do about their intimate emotional experiences.⁹⁹

In this regard, the years after 1970 – in which it seemed ‘the institutions of marriage and parenthood’ faced ‘[certain] revolution’ – is particularly ripe for study.¹⁰⁰

The matchmaking industry

If there has been a deficiency of work in the post-1970s period we can draw very fruitful insight from the analysis of earlier periods. Harry Cocks, the key contributor to the existing body of scholarship on commercial matchmaking, is primarily a scholar of Victorian sexuality drawn to the legal, technological and spatial frameworks shaping the pursuit of intimacy. While historians of emotion might find his conceptualisation of feelings such as love, desire and fear too thin, Cocks’s meticulous attention to material constraints has produced the clear and textured analysis required of such an ephemeral milieu and, as a consequence, his work has been a salutary guide for mine. Cocks’s analysis of British matchmaking focuses on the period between the 1870s and the

⁹⁷WT Stead, ‘A plea’, pp. 154-156.

⁹⁸Walter Besant joined Stead in arguing for the establishment of urban matrimonial bureaux, ‘A plea’, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁹⁹Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁰Margaret Drabble, in *The Permissive Society*, p. 26.

1920s, although it extends to the 1940s and beyond.¹⁰¹ His focus is matrimonial and contact ads, collated and printed by agent-editors in dedicated publications. Far from evoking a vanished past, this fascinating literature unearths a set of concerns that are integral to an understanding of matchmaking a century later.

The first of these is to do with medium. Early matchmaking services were rooted in the hectic, multifarious world of print periodicals and were inseparable from their expansion after the repeal of the Stamp Act by 1860.¹⁰² Development of newspaper advertising, which expanded after 1855, shaped the rise of matrimonial personals, which by the late Victorian period had become ‘one of the most prominent forms of specialized advertising’.¹⁰³ Although matrimonial advertisers were barred from British broadsheets after the mid-century, Cocks cites the appearance of at least 22 matrimonial newspapers between 1880 and 1914, while newspaper sales quadrupled in the same period.¹⁰⁴ Matthew Rubery, in his literary study of Victorian newspapers, highlights the fascination and centrality of personal adverts, which occupied the front pages of some broadsheets until 1908.¹⁰⁵ Although not explicitly matrimonial, there were lines by spurned lovers hoping to find their jilters and other ‘agony’ columns alongside a range of other, often shady interests.¹⁰⁶ The adverts’ attraction, based on their anonymous human drama, was intermixed with their potential danger. As Rubery observes, ‘unlike other sections of the newspaper, the advertising columns brought readers into potential contact with a variety of criminals’.

Close contact with duplicity and criminality in British newspapers became a growing part of their appeal in the early 20th century, with editors in the interwar period mining the confessions of a new breed of ‘entrepreneurs of experience’ – often ex-crooks – for all they could.¹⁰⁷ Unsurprisingly, the criminal possibilities encoded in newspaper

¹⁰¹Harry Cocks, *Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column* (London: Random House, 2009); Cocks, ‘The Pre-History of Internet Dating’, in I. Alev Dagim et al. (eds), *Online Courtship*.

¹⁰²Cocks, ‘The Cost of Marriage’, p. 71.

¹⁰³Cocks, ‘Peril in the Personals’, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴Cocks, ‘The Cost of Marriage’, p. 66; Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 204.

¹⁰⁵Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 50.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁷Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth; Personal Narratives in Nineteenth Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), cited in Matt Houlbrook (2013) ‘Fashioning an Ex-Crook Self:

personals – and particularly in the matrimonial ads of the specialist press – had a deeply gendered aspect. In particular, the tension between freedom of choice and danger provided a ready vehicle for knitting together anxieties related to the status of women. These revolved around the perception of increasing female romantic autonomy, which was linked to growing female economic independence – if women were driving department store sales, what might they do in the ‘sales’ pages of spouses?¹⁰⁸ As late as the 1970s, personals attracted moral censure, with vice squads intervening in the publishing of contact ads, prosecuting countercultural magazines like *Oz* and *International Times* over ‘obscenity’ – in reality, the legal meeting of men over 21.¹⁰⁹

There were more material grounds for concern in the allegations of fraud and sleaze affixed to the industry. WT Stead, the newspaperman credited with inventing the tabloid press, had an enduring interest in the commercial and social possibilities of matrimonial bureaux and had founded a club of his own, the Wedding Ring Circle, in 1898. Having made ‘an exhaustive investigation into all the then existing matrimonial agencies’ by instructing a member of staff to advertise as both a man and woman, Stead was able to conclude that there was a desperate hole in the market for an honest service and that the existing offering was ‘worse than worthless’.¹¹⁰ Without specifying the gender of the respondents, Stead stated that ‘in nine cases out of ten’, people wanted either ‘a mistress or cash’.¹¹¹ The matchmakers themselves were also regarded with suspicion – often depicted as immoral and degenerate.¹¹² In Cocks’s chronology, it wasn’t until the 1960s that the ‘dubious status of lonely hearts...ended’.¹¹³ However, rather than concur, it is the enduring inability of matchmaking services to shed their ‘dubious’ status, well after the 1960s, that provides one key strand of this thesis. The fraudulent aura surrounding such services remained an integral part of their perception, and had constantly to be kept at bay by agents. Instead of dissipating, the duality of a pragmatism and seediness, not

Citizenship and Criminality in the Work of Netley Lucas’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (1), pp. 1-30: 3.

¹⁰⁸Cocks discusses this at length in ‘Peril in the Personals’, especially pp. 10-12; for unease about female consumption in Victorian London, see Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* and Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁰⁹Cocks, ‘The Prehistory of Print and Online Dating’, p. 26.

¹¹⁰‘In the city of dreadful solitude’, p. 156.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

¹¹²See discussion of prosecution of Alfred Barrett of The Link in Cocks, *Classified*; Cocks, ‘The Cost of Marriage’.

¹¹³Cocks, ‘The Prehistory of Print and Online Dating’, p. 26.

to say danger, that attended such methods of mate-seeking would re-emerge with a vengeance in depictions of the lonely hearts business of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and has since transferred to the internet.¹¹⁴

Respectability was another recurrent motif in matchmaking discourse, arising from the differing agendas of customers, proprietors and commentators, and setting in place a tension that would linger into the late 20th century and beyond. It hung in the balance between pursuit of romantic choice, social class and gendered danger. It was also at stake in the clash between respectable customer motivation – the desire to achieve a romantically and socially felicitous union – with the questionable milieu in which it was pursued. Often the milieu seemed to eclipse or cast a bad light on the motivation. In the *Review of Reviews* debate in 1897 about matrimonial bureaux, Walter Besant drew attention to the ‘shameless Register’ of such agencies, pointing to the kind of young woman forced to spell out her desire for a ‘man who will marry her’. Her sort, he scoffed, wrote that ‘she is five feet six in height, that she is considered good-looking, that she has a good temper and is “domesticated”’.¹¹⁵ But, reasoned Besant in a criticism that would echo up the 20th century, ‘imagine a girl of self-respect proclaiming that she is ‘domesticated!’” In other words: if a woman is attractive, why advertise? For Fyvie Mayo, another contributor to the debate, ‘the very idea of such an institution [was] wholly repugnant’. Mayo ploughed a different corner of the critical field, reasoning that it was precisely the brazenness behind the mere contemplation of a marriage bureau that should have nixed the need for them – ‘it is hard to believe that [such people] could not easily get a ‘suitable partner’ (of some sort) soon enough.’¹¹⁶

The idea of dating agencies as damaged goods clubs remain part of the conceptual baggage surrounding commercial matchmaking, prompting a central line of questioning here about the extent to which this baggage impacted the industry and its users, and ways in which it did so. Moreover, the discomfort surrounding both paying money to find a spouse and the necessary articulation of financial standing in print would later move inwards to shape heated sexually-antagonistic debates among daters themselves, who took aim at the financial expectations of the opposite sex. Social snobbery, another

¹¹⁴Monica Whitty has extensively surveyed duplicity in online dating, e.g., with Adam Joinson, *Truth, Lies and Trust On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹⁵Besant, ‘In the city of dreadful solitude’, p. 154.

¹¹⁶Mayo, *ibid.*

facet shaping the development of the mediated dating business between 1970 and 2000, also contributed to unease about matrimonial advertising's respectability, since, as Cocks has illustrated in some detail, the primary customer base came from the 'new' clerk class.¹¹⁷ However, in the rounds of social commentary, it was pointed out that the upper classes were even more mercenary in their approach to matrimony than the upper working class or lower middle class *Matrimonial Gazette* advertiser, pursuing the exchange of wealth for title on the grander scale of the Season. It was also clear that marriages of all classes arranged in more traditional ways – especially second marriages – involved a pragmatism that could be seen as encroaching on conjugal sentiment.¹¹⁸

Methods and sources

The growing number of historians who see private life as a key area of historical enquiry – from affective states and the subconscious through to sexual practice – grapple with the question of access to interior experiences.¹¹⁹ The raft of new studies of sexual practice suggest that even the most private domains are now within reach of historians, brought closer by sources such as the frank diary entries of the Mass Observation Project (MOP) and the greater readiness among practitioners to use oral history. There are, however, unique obstacles in putting together a suitable source record for a survey of intimacy like this one. While personal accounts of courtship have received extensive attention in diaries and memoirs, mediated courtship has, since the late 19th century, been lived in the most ephemeral components of mostly print media. One of its mainstays, the personal ad, was both throwaway and enigmatic – the content of matrimonial ads was highly circumscribed and often cryptic. Further, such advertising, as well as other mediated methods such as in-person matchmakers, generated some discussion, but of a type that was again linked to ephemeral forms of journalism, commentary and middle-brow theatre.¹²⁰ Yet if the main source of commentary and information about the industry is the press, then neither the impact of that discourse on popular perception nor the experience of daters has had any obvious outlet. As Adrian Bingham has noted, evidence of newspaper reception is 'sketchy' at

¹¹⁷Cocks, *The Cost of Marriage*, pp. 68-71.

¹¹⁸Ginger Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 71.

¹¹⁹See discussion in Barbara Taylor and Sally Alexander (eds.) *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1-10.

¹²⁰Cocks, 'The Cost of Marriage', p. 75.

best; bald circulation figures – the only reliable indicators of readership preference – do not reveal ‘which particular aspects of a newspaper readers are responding’.¹²¹ So if we are to heed the insistence of both Peter Mandler and Jonathan Rose on analysing cultural sources also in terms of their social reach, with attention to extent, type and reaction of audience, then newspapers can only form one component of the evidence base.¹²²

Beyond newspapers, however, there are other archival problems with the matchmaking industry, which have remained surprisingly constant. Matchmakers, at least prior to the corporate world of global internet dating brands, did not leave accessible paper trails about their clients, their methods or their accounts. Pleading confidentiality, they have remained cagey about client information, inflating records of success in the knowledge that verification is impossible – in 1893 one editor of a matchmaking periodical would claim to make ‘twenty marriages a week and as many as 176 in a day’, much as in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s ever-greater numbers of agency customers would be cited in newspaper features on the topic, without consistency or verifiability.¹²³ Furthermore, in the pre-Internet period, agencies – the slice of the industry not occupied by lonely hearts adverts – were sufficiently small-scale to escape an official policy access to records. Even Dateline, probably the UK’s best-known dating agency, established in 1966 and bought by Columbus Group Publishing in 1998, subsequently changing hands several times again, has apparently dissolved any direct means of contact despite my efforts at finding one.¹²⁴ It should also be noted that matchmaking attracts a particular type of

¹²¹Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 9.

¹²²Peter Mandler (2004), ‘The Problem With Cultural History’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (1), pp. 94-117; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 9.

¹²³Cocks, ‘The Cost of Marriage’, p. 67. Newspaper coverage of the dating industry often admitted that the available data about the size of the industry and the customer base was unreliable, e.g. ‘Tills ring as the agencies trade in love’, *The Independent*, 14 Feb 1992, p. 25.

¹²⁴Attempts to follow the Dateline trail have led only to anonymous directorships, without LinkedIn or other professional pages. After its purchase of Dateline, along with dating agencies Elite and Sirius, in 1998, Columbus reorganized, splitting off its dating services arm, including Dateline, into an Alternative Investment Market-listed (AIM) called OneSaturday, an online portal, in 2000. OneSaturday was sold for just £500,000 (it was valued at £12m in 2000) in 2004 to YooMedia. (‘Dateline finds a new admirer’, thisismoney.co.uk, 22 June 2004). In 2007, YooMedia disposed of Dateline, which had been trading under the name YooMedia Dating Group Ltd, for £250,000, in ‘the final stage in the exit of YooMedia from the dating sector’. It also placed in receivership another dating subsidiary, Avenues, in 2007. Dateline was bought by a ‘consortium’ funded by Arc Management Holdings Limited and Capital Ideas Limited (YooMedia trading notice, 31 Jan, 2008. www.mirada.tv/assets/Uploads/pdfs/YooMediaCircular31.01.08.pdf). However, following a management buy-in, Dateline Holdings bought YooMedia;

person, one ready to face – and face off – assumptions of sleaze and dodgy dealing. Always keen courtiers of publicity for their method, matchmakers have rarely established solid personal fame, and have not been prompted – perhaps prudently – to leave personal archives. Nor – with several important if obscure exceptions – have people advertising for partners generally felt compelled to go public or even to privately discuss their forays into matchmaking media. Such reticence, reinforced by a fear of stigma that has only dissipated in Britain in the last few years, clearly presents considerable barriers to accessing the personal experience at the heart of social history. So, as will be explained in more detail below, any in-depth study of courtship services both as an industry and as a set of socially-mediated practices requires willingness on the part of the historian to take a holistic approach in assembling a scrappy archive drawn from disparate sources.

The previous section examined the historiographical terrain surrounding courtship and mediated courtship. I suggested that one of the areas of difficulty in pursuing the topic within this disciplinary frame is the piecemeal, unofficial nature of the source base – there is no institutional archive documenting the business, nor any previously assembled record of any other nature relating to it. As a result, I have adopted a flexible approach, collecting data from an eclectic range of cultural and social sources. It must be noted, however, that the time period under study here – the thirty years before commercial dating largely moved online – was partly selected so as to avoid the far more evidentially dubious state of early internet records. While the services under scrutiny here were far from consistent or reliable in their paper trail, they nonetheless left one, in part because of their close relationship with the world of print. Many agencies advertised in newspapers and magazines, and some placed ads on behalf of their customers in these places. Meanwhile, the lonely hearts segment of the industry revolved around personals placed in accessible publications, such as *Time Out* and *The Guardian*. In contrast to old internet dating profiles, the ads themselves are easily available. And, because a clearly human hand was involved in both agency

Capital Ideas claimed it had ‘over one million registered users’ at this point, but this figure is not verifiable (Capital Ideas PLC Trading Update, 4 Jan 2008. www.investegate.co.uk/capital-ideas-plc--capt-/rns/trading-update/200801040700270703). Since 2009, the Dateline name has transferred to a generic website called Dating Factory, a white label and ‘private dating’ platform. I contacted the CEO of Dating Factory, Tanya Feathers, several times in May 2016 in the hope of finding out more information about a possible company archive but was unsuccessful.

matchmaking and in the assembly of personals pages, of which there were a limited number, there is a clearer sense of who did what behind the scenes. It has been possible to look for comments by, and reach out for interviews with, the people involved in matchmaking in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. By contrast, internet matching – which puts the concealed workings of machinery at the forefront of the service – did not appear to provide an equivalent cast of characters amenable to historical research. Nor have repositories of early web pages, such as the British Library, been able to save the personally sensitive, commercial internal pages of online dating sites. While web recapture site The Wayback Machine does hold some older pages of sites like Match, captures of pages from before 2009 are from the US site, and show only a partially reloaded home page.

A range of media comes to the fore in this thesis, including newspapers, magazines and television documentaries and programmes. Discussing the value of print media, Adrian Bingham has pointed to an indispensable source of clues about politics, economics but also ‘the circulation of ideas about gender’.¹²⁵ Yet the majority of cultural work on modern media has concerned questions of identity, with a wide literature on media and sexuality.¹²⁶ Media representations of the social dimensions of intimacy have been comparatively left out of focus. However, not only was dating of growing interest to British editors, the media is indispensable in illuminating how understandings of gender and mediated dating shaped one another at a time when feminist discourse became far-reaching.

Before discussing my sources in more detail there is one further note to make on method. In this thesis, the same sources are used throughout, weaving in and out rather than used to structure individual chapters. This is because my sources are not only various in type, they are disparate in historical nature. Some provide snapshots of the time, such as press articles, while others, such as interviews, provide retrospective reflection. Some are metropolitan, others are not; some concern users and some the people running the industry. This variation invited me to tether mediated dating to both the dictates and contingencies of the industry and the experience, goals and

¹²⁵ Adrian Bingham, ‘Media Products As Historical Artefacts’, in Martin Conboy and John Steel (eds), *Routledge Companion to British Media History* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 25.

¹²⁶ Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was A Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing In Modern British Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007).

preoccupations of its customers rather than to map it against particular bodies of evidence. A complete picture is never possible, but the sources considered here have offered a view of many facets.

Print media

British newspapers are widely seen by modern historians to ‘reveal much about the development of British society’.¹²⁷ First, before Internet dating, lonely hearts culture was inherently print-based, dependent on widely-read newspapers for both editorial and advertising coverage. Indeed the history of post-war mediated dating has largely been set out in a sporadic but enduring media discourse – particularly in broadsheet newspapers aimed at a professional or middle class audience: *The Times* and *The Guardian* each ran close to 1,000 articles containing the term ‘lonely hearts’ between 1970 and 2015; *The Daily Mirror* ran just 312. Second, newspapers allow us to see the evolution of a linked editorial and commercial interest in dating, whereby feature and news coverage eventually became linked to the newspapers’ revenue in the form of sections such as *Guardian Soulmates* and *Times Encounters*. Third, this thesis pursues dating as it was viewed and experienced by a public of both men and women, and is particularly interested in the conversations between the two sexes that were vented in various aspects of print media. While women’s magazines in particular frequently discussed strategies of pursuit and relations with the opposite sex, they were addressing predominantly young women.¹²⁸ By contrast, newspapers were read by both genders, and the lonely hearts only worked because both sexes read them. Consequently, gender-specific journals play less of a role than either newspapers or general readership magazines.

Broadsheet coverage offers insight into pre-Internet mediated dating culture in two main ways. First, it brings to light the trope of ‘lonely hearts’ in discourse, emphasising the way class and education are mapped onto the subject. Second, and in a more basic respect, newspapers are often the only source of information about the dating industry in this period, and alerted me to people, publications and businesses I would not have found otherwise. Both of these analytical benefits require some disclaimers, however.

¹²⁷Adrian Bingham, ‘Media Products as Historical Artefacts’, p. 19.

¹²⁸Winship, *Inside Women’s Magazines*.

Media coverage should not be equated with reality. After all, an array of political, personal and economic agendas determining selection and construction of articles means impartiality of reporting is not possible. Nor is there an equivalence between media agendas and those of their readership. Thus while newspapers are an important piece of many people's discursive universe, delivery of their 'preferred meanings' is hard to gauge; further, what they represent as important, or indeed what really is cataclysmic, may not agree with what 'the man on the street' sees.¹²⁹ Once these caveats are acknowledged, however, the case remains that newspapers are a key object of cultural and social study as well as a primary source: as Bingham has pointed out, 'journalists tend to stick with what is successful'.¹³⁰

I have focussed on four newspapers: two broadsheets and two tabloids, approximating a fair representation of the total British national newspaper offering in this period. I chose *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Express*, and charted over the thirty-year period all articles that used the terms 'lonely hearts', 'computer dating' or 'dating ads'. *The Times* and *Guardian* covered dating services in a wide range of writing, including arts, opinion, first-person and in-depth features as well as news stories. *The Guardian*, unlike *The Times*, analysed the state of dating in such a way as to highlight its progressive politics, paying close attention to foul tactics in the industry and highlighting flare-ups of sexism within it. Its seriousness of reportage about the industry has made it one of my most valuable sources of information. *The Guardian's* coverage reflected its concern for social issues, while *The Times* stressed class by implication, through its self-consciously breezy, detached tone of reporting. Using dating agencies, it was conveyed in the *Times's* editorial voice, was probably something other people did, but none the less interesting for that.

Despite its relentless populism, *The Daily Mail* offered extremely rich coverage as its combination of prurience and conservatism meant a fervent interest in the sexual implications of singles' strategies and of the development of the singles market. In contrast to *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Express* used a conservative, generally anti-feminist lens to chart the ways in which loneliness moved across the

¹²⁹*Daily Express* sub-editor to Royal Commission on the Press (1949), p. 104, cited in Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, p. 10; see also Bingham, 'Media Products', p. 21.

¹³⁰Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, p. 1.

romantic landscape, emphasising sexual deviance and crime of menace to both men and women. All of these newspapers are used to highlight different aspects of mediated dating, but are also drawn from as needed to add texture as well as to substantiate points of information and chronology in the absence of more official documentation.

Among the selection of magazines I consulted, two of particular note are *Time Out* and *Singles*. *Time Out* represents the metropolitan scene, and played an important role in the development of London as a lonely hearts centre after 1970. Using its credibility as a guide for urban, culturally engaged people, its mediated matchmaking service was launched in 1971 as the first in British history to be popularly perceived as attracting people of all sorts, including the hip and ‘well-heeled university types’.¹³¹ The section thrived and became identified with the magazine’s brand.¹³² *Time Out*, however, did not generally cover dating editorially, but the people involved in management of the lonely hearts pages were a source of valuable insight into operational realities. Still affectionate towards the distinctive organisation and work culture of the magazine, several of its former lonely hearts managers as well as Tony Elliott, *Time Out*’s founder, were available and keen to share their experiences and observations of the section from its early days in 1971 through to the 1980s. In addition, the style, tone and recurrent features of the magazine’s personal ads offer insight into the affective texture surrounding their placement as well as clues as to what going on dates in London might have entailed.

Singles magazine is a unique, rich and voluminous source. Produced by Dateline, the computer dating firm, between 1977 and 2004, it was the only magazine for a mixed-sex readership dedicated to singleness and the concerns of daters in Britain in the period. The magazine was at its most editorially dense and diverse between its launch in 1977 and 1983, when the emphasis moved away from the social aspects of singleness towards the commercial in the form of personal ads. In its editorial heyday before 1983, feature articles covered a large range of topics relating to relationships, sex, psychology, intimacy, dating and singles lifestyle. The magazine also exhibited an intriguing political voice as it passed its eye over a range of news items. *Singles* also carried an expanding section of personal ads, of between eight and 24 pages, which operated at a

¹³¹ZS’s correspondence with Peter Knights, *Time Out* ad manager in the early 1970s, July 2014.

¹³²John Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (London: Guild, 1988), p. 22.

seeming tangent from the Dateline computer service with whom it shared a stable. Apart from the wealth of otherwise obscure information relating to dating and singles, *Singles* is an extremely valuable source of first-person testimony, expressed via a letters section that took missives from a wide range of readers. *Singles* letters pages are valuable for both composition and content. The section was relatively lengthy at two to four pages each month carrying letters of varying lengths, some up to 600 words or more. Letters were divided fairly equally between men and women, allowing the creation of a debating terrain which would become increasingly fractious and antagonistic. The equal gender representation in the letters pages allows for a privileged glimpse into the workings of sexual politics set against intimate aspirations.

The value of this collection of letters accrues in light of the fact that they were knowingly ephemeral, written often out of pique at other letters or indeed at social or political events, rather than for posterity. A central aim of this thesis is to explore ordinary people's navigation of the romantic landscape at this time. *Singles'* letters allow me to do this as well as to leave the confines of the city. Readers were generally situated outside of activist networks, the intelligentsia or the commentariat and, crucially, London. An average letters section contained just two out of eight from London, showing how pressing were many of the issues of romantic isolation – and solutions for remedying it – beyond the capital. Furthermore, many readers had financial or other economic worries, and found the contemporary dater's pressurised cocktail of expense and aspiration somewhat toxic. Their concerns and opinions offer insight into the play of class and income across romantic structures and norms. Readers also represented experiences across generations. They ranged from those in their early twenties, facing the possibilities and pressures of the late 1970s and early 1980s at the start of their adult lives, to divorcees in their 60s re-encountering the field and a completely different range of dating services after decades-long marriages. Thus both aspects of the historical moment are covered: that experienced as self-evident, and that seen and felt in relation to the past.

Finally, by representing a variety of opinions, including those reflexively identified as working or lower middle class, the letters pages provide a rare glimpse of how vocabularies relating to permissiveness, feminism and dating circulated outside of activist or media networks in the 1970s and 80s. Such insight is important, given that

we know far more about the deployment of new languages and the debates surrounding them in activist networks and among the cultural elite. Thus *Singles* will be used across the thesis in a variety of ways. It is a listening instrument for the ways in which sexual and gender-political change was understood and formulated as it happened, and a means of accessing the concerns of non-elites and non-activists, whose responses to the gendered upheaval of the period have so far been sidelined. This is especially true of the implications for their romantic lives.

First-person testimony

If the media outlined above offer snapshots of the past as it happened, then many of the first-person sources introduced here are retrospective, with up to 40 years informing their recollections.

With nine interviews with former mediated daters and ten interviews with industry professionals, my oral histories form a relatively small fraction of the total number of first-person testimonies considered in the thesis: the following reflections on my use of oral history interviews are therefore kept briefer than would be appropriate in a more concentrated, larger-scale oral history project. As Fisher and Szreter have asserted, a key advantage of recollective evidence is that it puts past experience ‘in dialogue with the present’, such that the concerns of the present clarify – rather than distort – some of the experiences of the past.¹³³ In the case of heterosexual dating, which unfolds between discursive and political models of male and female roles and the experience of masculinity and femininity in situ, recollection offers a valuable long view on gendered change as well as a narrative epilogue to the activity itself. The interviews in particular provide dense snapshots of particular dates and encounters as well as insights into how individuals make sense of the less defined process of mediated dating over a period of time. Another advantage of such evidence, when it has been collected in a relatively open-ended way, is that it allows the object of study to emerge within the context of people’s lives. Rather than being marshalled for a dedicated article or special interest magazine, in the oral and written narratives studied here, experiences emerge as part of a wider life tapestry. Appreciation of this tempers any tendency towards interpreting the

¹³³Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 11.

flourishing of mediated dating as a self-contained development, and emphasises the need to see it instead of as part of a tissue of individual affective and material concerns.

Any historian working with sources based on recollection must acknowledge their passage through memory and thus their vulnerability to the needs and slips of memory. However in this case, for reasons that are suggested below, I would argue that memory is not as ‘highly problematic’ a medium as some historians have suggested.¹³⁴ Oral testimony has been valued for drawing out the views of those who would not necessarily be included in historical accounts. It thus valorises non-elite experience and – traditionally – that of marginalised groups such as working class women and ethnic minorities.¹³⁵ I cannot claim that users of matchmaking services are necessarily marginalised, but – as has been suggested throughout this introduction – they meet another criteria for oral history. This is that their experience is unknown, in many cases circumscribed by stigma and discretionary norms around the articulation of private experiences of romantic vulnerability. But it is also, simply, another valuable source, uniquely available to the historian of late 20th century Britain, and for the scholar of a topic as little documented as mediated dating in the pre-Internet decades, could not be disregarded. Moreover, establishing the contours of the industry and the experience of navigating it has been partly dependent on the details and tangents and sudden thoughts that emerged through discussion with former clients. Taken together as well as individually, the direction and emphases of the interviews helped me develop a sense of the emotional and social apparatus within which people pursued their dates.

Kate Fisher has outlined the diversity of both caveats and promises facing the contemporary oral historian of intimate life. For the scholar of specifically sexual practice, as Fisher (and Szreter) have pointed out, these include a range of evasions, retrospective glosses and the difficulty of articulating sensual memories, but also moments of breakthrough clarity, honesty and a pleasurable sense of imparting hitherto cloistered knowledge and experience.¹³⁶ Other challenges facing the oral historian

¹³⁴Ross McKibbin (2014), ‘The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010 by Selina Todd’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (4), pp. 651-654: 653.

¹³⁵Joanna Bornat (1994), ‘Is Oral History Auto/Biography?’ *Auto-Biography*, 3.1/3.2, pp. 17-30; Dorothy Sheridan (1996), ‘Damned anecdotes and dangerous confabulations: Mass-Observation as Life History’, Mass Observation Occasional Paper No. 7, University of Sussex Library.

¹³⁶Kate Fisher, *Birth Control: Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 13-18; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, pp. 2-4.

include those around memory and the auxiliary process of composure in recollection, yet the topic under study here deserves a lighter touch. Although sexual codes have changed since my subjects' matchmaking endeavours, for several reasons I did not expect dating to be considered a particularly private topic, nor an arena of political or personal compromise, shame or trauma, characteristics that traditionally complicate the relationship between interviewer and subject, present and past, memory and experience. While it entails the possibly sensitive subject of intimacy thresh-holds, dating does not *assume* a sexual or physical aspect, nor any guarantees for the future either physical or emotional. Its interest lies in its promise, its possibilities and its organisation, rather than in its physicality. In other words, it is a socially determined manifestation of private emotional yearnings. In the case of the oral evidence collected here, the social wrapping gave the topic a comfortable valence, while the private domain of motivation for partner-searching, when discussed, did not need to be described in compromising sexual terms, but instead were recalled in terms of, for instance, countering loneliness or the desire for a family.

While stigma around mediated dating in the period inhibited the ready volunteering of experience at the time, once assured of my scholarly interest and the confidentiality of the testimony, the act of recollecting, defused by maturity and time, did not seem problematic. After subjects were contacted, a cordial email exchange ensued and the meetings took place in cafes convenient for my subjects. The atmosphere of having coffee and cake added to the sense of respondents' enjoyment in sharing an aspect of their lives they hadn't had the chance or impulse to discuss at length before. Crucially, the fact that my interviewees took pleasure in imparting the expertise of their own experience to aid the scholarly enterprise of a young researcher, as well as to simply speak discursively on their romantic histories and lives more generally, chimes with Szreter and Fisher's account of 'what's in it for them'.¹³⁷ Therefore, while I acknowledge the necessity of the extensive, sophisticated process through which oral historians of sex such as Szreter and Fisher have built the trust necessary for participants to offer a full account of their experience, my interview context appeared to entail fewer barriers to personal revelation.¹³⁸ This is not to say that a relaxed and secure environment was not important in enabling participants to speak freely about their lives:

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 9.

¹³⁸Ibid., pp. 3-4; Fisher, *Birth Control*, p. 14.

rather, that the social and romantic, rather than sexual, aspects of experience seemed to neutralise potential anxieties about trust, with some respondents even suggesting that I use their real names.

In studying dating services in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, I focus on people who either sought out their experiences or actually ran dating businesses. Thus power-related concerns about the relationship between interviewer and subject when the subject has been a victim of oppression or disaster, or when she or he is revealing highly sensitive or compromising personal information, are offset here by the degree of explicit control and agency exercised by my subjects in the area under scrutiny. Customers of mediated dating services sought out their experiences, adding an extra layer of control to the process by paying for help in finding dates. Although many did not pursue their course of action free of concerns, they did not generally experience their mediated dating as either a traumatic or a revelatory experience. This is reflected in the fact their testimonies were fluent, composed and delivered in a spirit of enjoyment or bemused remembrance rather than full of silences, disruptions and other cognitive slips requiring scrutiny. No interviewee conveyed a sense of their past attempts of mediated dating being ‘off limits’: on the contrary, the interview experience felt more like a collaboration between researcher and subject. In some cases, there was evidence of personal, therapeutic motive in coming forward; in other cases the provision of helpful documents, saved over the years, showed a lively agency in my subjects.¹³⁹

Even though I did not perceive problems arising from the interview process relating either to power differentials or sensitivity of subject, I showed my respect for their generosity in granting an interview, as well as for their desire to do so, by taking care not to impose my own interests on them. I followed a life history method, prompting them to give an open-ended, roughly chronological story of their lives, so that dating could be situated organically within a matrix of other factors, or in their ‘sense-making systems’ more widely.¹⁴⁰ As Fisher has pointed out, questions of intimacy are particularly bound up in individuals’ identities, so that the ‘intrusion’ of subjectivity into the account is ‘highly revealing’ of their experience rather than obfuscatory, and a

¹³⁹For discussion, see Sheridan, ‘Damned Anecdotes’, p. 7 and J. Amos Hatch and Richard Wisniewsky (eds), *Life History and Narrative* (Falmer: Falmer Press, 1995).

¹⁴⁰Sheridan, ‘Damned Anecdotes’, p. 7.

key benefit of the life history method.¹⁴¹ Moreover, given the easily delineated topic under discussion, those ‘intrusions’ signalled by moments of ‘poor recall, exaggeration, concealment, or post-hoc revision’ were relatively rare.¹⁴² My subjects were, by and large, remarkably focussed in their recollections, though sometimes the sense of authority accorded to them by virtue of their experience led them to ruminate either expansively and in general terms on the past, or with extreme specificity on aspects of their lives unconnected with mediated dating, such as parents or colleagues. As evidence of the wider psychic and biographical contours in which people made sense of their choice to use singles services, none of these seeming digressions were discounted even if they were not included in the final work presented here. And although these were unstructured interviews, I did suggest several areas for reflection when they did not crop up organically, especially concerning the impact of changing sexual politics, namely feminism. The fact that most of my subjects did not automatically cite feminism as a factor shaping their attitude to dating served as a reminder that, despite the prominence of gender roles, the relationship between sexual politics and dating is not always conscious or pronounced. The same delicacy towards that relationship should also inform analyses of broader experiences of everyday life.

My interviews include the testimonies of both clients and matchmakers, and these people were reached in a variety of ways. Of the latter, five were involved in *Time Out*’s significant ‘lonely hearts’ section in the 1970s and 1980s; one person was involved in *Dateline* from the 1960s through the 1990s, and two ran introduction agencies in the 1980s and one in the 1990s. *Time Out* staff were particularly keen to speak with me, reflecting the uniqueness of the magazine as a workplace and the loyalty it generated among staff in the 1970s.¹⁴³ While not all of their testimonies receive substantial treatment here, they all provided vital contextual detail and a means for cross-checking other accounts of the magazine’s lonely hearts section. After an initial meeting with former editor Simon Garfield, with whom I was connected through a professional contact, Garfield gave me *Time Out* founder Tony Elliott’s contact details and we arranged a meeting; Elliott then put me in touch with former ad managers Irene Campbell, Jane Rackham, Suzy Marwood and Peter Knights. As for agency

¹⁴¹Kate Fisher, *Birth Control*, p. 13.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*

¹⁴³In the early 1980s, a set of core *Time Out* staff left to found the more radical left magazine *City Limits* in protest to Elliott’s end of equal pay for all employees.

matchmakers, Mary Balfour of Drawing Down the Moon and Heather Heber Percy both responded to my emails requesting an interview, while I was put in touch with Julia by an acquaintance that knew her.¹⁴⁴ Sandy Nye, the former head of computer dating agency Dateline sent me an email after seeing the notice about my research in *Saga* magazine. Balfour and Julia were interviewed in their homes in West London; Heber Percy in her Chiswick, London office, and Nye in a tearoom in Rochester, Kent, where she lives. I reached out to several other agency heads but did not receive a reply.

I acknowledge the potential problems of advertising for participants in newspapers and magazines, particularly those concerning the distortions associated with interviewing only the type of person motivated to respond to such prompts. However, the method seemed fitting and appropriate for this study, since it is directly interested in those who pro-actively participated in the print culture of lonely hearts ads, or in many cases responded to adverts for introduction agencies. Indeed my most successful means of reaching former daters was a notice in *Saga*: seven former mediated daters people replied this way. In addition to *Saga*, one interviewee – Elaine – overheard me interviewing another respondent (Adele) in a café in central London and chimed in; we then arranged a separate interview. In terms of age, my respondents were between 60 and 76 at the time of interview, and had used singles services between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s. Elaine was in her late 20s and early 30s when she began using mediated matchmaking services between 1978-1981; Martia was the same age at the same period when she answered ads in *Time Out* and *Private Eye*; Michael, Millie and Mary had used agencies when previous marriages ended (Michael and Millie were 56 and 50 when they met in 1990; Mary turned 50 in 1995), Adele had been in her early 20s in the early 70s when she used an agency, and Lily was in her late 20s and early 30s when she used first an agency and then *City Limits* lonely hearts.

Saga's readership is the largest of all British monthly general lifestyle magazines, at around 421,000 readers.¹⁴⁵ Yet all of the replies came from London or its surrounds, and all but one were from women, foregrounding important questions of gender, class and region in the demographic of dating service customers. While self-proclaimed class

¹⁴⁴Julia is not her real name, which was changed on request.

¹⁴⁵Top 100 in print magazines table, ABC figures, 'Magazines ABCs: Top 100 at a glance', *Campaign*, 12 Feb 2015, www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/1333599/magazines-abcs-top-100-glance.

varied among respondents, all lived independently and apparently comfortably. The prevalence of responses from women from the South-East echoed the patterns of response of Mass Observation diarists.¹⁴⁶ In the case of dating, it is also likely that women felt more comfortable responding to another woman, and less constrained in discussing the topic. This would be in line with well-explored issues of masculine reticence around intimate or private matters.¹⁴⁷

For any historian of 20th century Britain interested in how changing romantic norms were seen and felt by ordinary people, Mass Observation is a crucial staging post. In particular for those interested in post-war Britain, the Mass Observation Project (MOP), the series of questionnaires or ‘directives’ established in 1982, is particularly useful.¹⁴⁸ The ‘unrepresentativeness’ of Mass Observation, through the self-selectivity of respondents and the prevalence of women and people from the South-East, has been folded into nuanced appraisals of the archive’s distinct strengths.¹⁴⁹ Claire Langhamer, whose recent work draws heavily on Mass Observation, has attributed to it special access to the ‘ways in which individual men and women experienced, perceived, and remember the profound social, cultural and political and economic shifts of the twentieth century’.¹⁵⁰ While mediated dating can not be called a ‘profound’ shift in itself, it belongs to a wider culture of change surrounding intimate and gender norms. The MOP both includes invaluable personal accounts of these, and of the place of courtship within them. In using MOP testimonies, however, I am cognizant of Ben Highmore’s insistence that ‘the particularity of respondents’ quotes are never held hostage by overriding arguments: they always remain little islands of singularity, fractals of a life-world that exceed an argument’.¹⁵¹ Like all historians drawing on the rich cache of Mass Observation’s ‘telling cases’, my goal and challenge here is to

¹⁴⁶Dorothy Sheridan, ‘Using the Mass-Observation Archive As A Source For Women's Studies’, *Women's History Review*, 3 (1), pp. 101-113: 109.

¹⁴⁷John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Terence Real, *I Don't Want To Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

¹⁴⁸The meaning of ‘ordinary’ in relation to Mass Observation is discussed extensively in Sheridan, ‘Damned Anecdotes’, pp. 10 and 11. Ordinary is taken to indicate, both by Mass Observation creators and respondents what people are not, ‘they are not academics, politicians, policy makers, published writers, professional historians, journalists, controllers of the media and other spokespersons – people who have certain sorts of power to define what history is’. Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Sheridan, ‘Damned anecdotes’ and ‘Using The Mass-Observation Archive’; Annebella Pollen (2013), ‘Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: “Scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee’s tea party at the zoo”?’ *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (1), pp. 213-235.

¹⁵⁰Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p. xvi.

¹⁵¹Cited in Pollen, ‘Research Methodology’, p. 222.

mediate between the historical and social and the particular and individual. While, as Pollen as has made clear, historians of more traditional historical subjects have had to rigorously justify their use of the archive, for the historian of intimacy, MOP evidence is ideally constituted, with 'subjectivity and intimate detail' – the keystones of romantic life – at the forefront of accounts.¹⁵²

While a number of MOP directives relate to intimacy, Courting and Dating (Summer 2001) is unique in drawing out dating from sex, gender and marriage. Of particularly obvious benefit to me was the question that asked respondents explicitly about the use of dating services. Whether or not they had used them, their entries were telling, suggesting not only valuable points of information when they had tried them, but clues about perception when they hadn't. Often those without personal experience of dating agencies had developed impressions – usually unfavourable – of internet dating based on hearsay. More widely, the directive provided a sense of historical change in how people navigated a path through social convention and private desire. Respondents reflected on the traditions shaping their experiences of pre-marital friendships and romances, including methods of wooing and location of dates, as well as on dating as a barometer of sexual norms before marriage. Indeed memories of sexual expectations in courtship emerged as one of the strongest markers of historical change, and were particularly strongly rooted to the historical moments they belonged to.

Many diarists were of retirement age, and their memories of courtship stretched back before the period of this study, often to wartime and before. Far from rendering them irrelevant, the wide span of memory in this directive provided an important reminder of the flaws of periodization, and the importance of remembering generational rather than just chronological time. Moreover, when elderly people writing in 2001 reflected on their wartime experiences of courtship, they did so within the context of their present lives, as grandparents and parents of people who grew up in the 1970s and later. Their connection to younger family and friends prompted telling reflections about the subjective if partial nature of impressions of historical change. The directive also contained numerous responses from younger people, 50 and below. These provided a fascinating contrast with the experiences of their seniors. Strong themes of change in

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 223.

dating emerged in their testimony, revolving around the increased casualness of romantic intent and in attitudes towards physical intimacy.

This thesis also relies on a number of first-person testimonies that fall outside the MOP and my own oral histories. One set was gathered by John Cockburn, a self-styled social researcher who undertook an investigation of lonely hearts advertising in the late 1980s. Cockburn ‘analysed over 6,000 ads’, interviewed over 200 people who had placed or responded to personals, with a roughly even mix between men and women, and transcribed significant passages from these interviews. The under-representation of male respondents to the MOP Courting and Dating directive, and to my call for interviewees, is one reason Cockburn’s data is valuable. Another is that his own framing of the study underlined the ways in which mediated dating was perceived to be tied up with broader changes in gender politics and particularly women’s status. This is not an academic study, and Cockburn’s rather heavy-handed categorisation of themes and subjects raises questions about his interview methods and the degree to which he steered his respondents’ answers. Nonetheless, his methods – which involved advertising for interview subjects in newspapers, writing to people ‘direct, via their box number’ and even going undercover as a lonely heart himself – resulted in an unparalleled collection of first-person views, many of them transcribed at enough length to eclipse fears of interviewer interference.¹⁵³ This thesis also draws on the rich text of Colette Sinclair’s *Manhunt*, an exhaustive memoir of the material and emotional experience of using lonely hearts ads and dating agencies in the mid-to-late 1980s.¹⁵⁴ Sinclair’s account is particularly useful as an extreme example of how the tension between materialistic ambition and romantic yearning could come together against a backdrop of high Thatcherism, and forms a key part of the discussion of consumerism in Chapter Four.

If the dating industry relied on print media, then dating discourse also emerged in a number of television programmes concerned with matchmaking, which a relatively small but revealing section of my source base. While game shows such as *Mr and Mrs*

¹⁵³Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. vii. Cockburn himself admits that the ‘false pretences’ on which he met some female interviewees could be seen as ‘unethical’ and ‘improper’, but excused himself on the grounds that he was ‘listening attentively to [their] stories...and provided a valuable therapy session’. He also reminded the concerned reader that he changed all names and also some professional or geographic details in some cases. *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹⁵⁴Colette Sinclair, *Manhunt* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989).

(Border Television, from 1961) and *Blind Date* (ITV, from 1985) testify to the fascination with putting people on the spot in romantic scenarios, I found more sober and informative investigations such as the documentaries *Singles* (Carlton, 1993) and *Man Seeks Woman* (BBC, 1995) particularly rich sources. Scholars have seen TV as offering audiences ‘the coherence of broader social experience’.¹⁵⁵ Yet these documentaries work in another way too, in offering a snapshot of a hidden part of social experience, and emphasising the marginality of its subjects. While the print sources examined here ran a mixture of types of articles about the matchmaking industry, with one dominant theme insisting on the normalisation and even glamour of dating services and the single lifestyle, the television documentaries offered close-up views of dejection and isolation. As Susan Douglas, Roger Horrocks, Gary Whannel and Susan Faludi have emphasised, television also provides a heightened stage in which gendered struggles to attain idealised masculinities and femininities unfold – this dimension is particularly emphasised in documentaries about dating, and in the case of *Would Like to Meet* (BBC, 2001), in the highly gendered deconstruction of a woman’s failed attempts to be attractive and get a date.¹⁵⁶ Finally, television is a vital means of capturing ‘echoes of the voices, glimpses of the clothing and the self-presentations of ordinary people recorded or interviewed on camera’.¹⁵⁷ In addition to offering important material, visual and informative clues about the industry and its perception, it is also a barometer for the status of dating as an entertainment concept, which is an important part of its development in modern Britain. Mediated dating has always occupied a point somewhere on the line between modern pragmatism and a seedy fringe, and its depiction as an object of televisual investigation adds to our understanding of the place of commercial matchmaking on that line.

¹⁵⁵David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 3. See also Gavin Schaffer’s discussion of television as a distancing device that enables viewers to think about their own (different) position, *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960-1980* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), p. 3.

¹⁵⁶Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 9; Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 170; Gary Whannel, ‘The Lads and the Gladiators: Traditional Masculinities in a Postmodern Televisual Landscape, in Edward Buscombe’ (Ed.), *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 290-203.

¹⁵⁷Bingham, ‘Media Products’, p. 22.

Structure

In seeking to provide a conceptual as well as empirical picture of the mediated dating scene over 30 years, I have chosen a thematic structure rather than a chronological or a source-led one. The chapters in this thesis are designed to reflect its two-fold aim: to sketch the contours of the dating industry in Britain between 1970 and 2000, and to situate that industry within a wider tissue of concerns surrounding the pursuit of romantic fulfilment.

Chapter One asserts the importance of the new affective-romantic landscape facing singles and daters in the period. This is explained first in terms of a new discourse around coupledness, in dialogue with recent work by Ben Mechen on the creation of a new type of heterosexual subject in the 1970s. My focus is on the perceived psychological rather than the sexual benefits of coupling, with consideration of the types of pressure such a psychologically-inflected discourse put on singles to find partners. Naturally, however, sex cannot be discounted from this picture, especially in terms of a new intensity of appetite for information about adult relationships that was often couched in sexological terms, epitomised in such publications as the ‘encyclopaedia for man-woman relationships’, *Man & Woman*.¹⁵⁸ The chapter then introduces the idea of a new kind of singleness. The 1970s, I will suggest, marked the start of a key period in the evolution of singleness from being ‘in the shadow’ of marriage to being a social status of a different nature. Rather than being seen as a problem because it signified un-marriedness, singleness began to be seen, on one hand, as an area of concern for emotional health, and on the other as a period of heightened promise in terms of both ‘lifestyle’ and sexual freedom. But when presented as a problem, singleness now suggested a concomitant array of solutions, in which mediated dating figured centrally. Solving the problem of singleness, it was increasingly suggested, could be done by taking control, whether through lonely hearts or by joining an agency.

Chapters Two and Three examine the contours of the mediated dating industry from different perspectives. Chapter Two focuses on the composition of the industry over this

¹⁵⁸*Man & Woman: The Marshall Cavendish Encyclopedia of Adult Relationships* (London: Marshall Cavendish, 1970-1972).

period, elucidating the range of services and the differences between them. Newspaper evidence is particularly relied upon for this section, since newspapers are, in many cases, the only extant chroniclers of the agencies that operated across the period. Chapter Three moves from an examination of the industry itself to its representations and the perceptions these engendered, and charts the emergence of a dating discourse concerned with what it meant for gender, class and safety to meet strangers.

In Chapter Four, having examined the interplay between the relational climate and the dating industry, I focus on the customer in a range of first-person accounts. These sources are used to explore why and how people deployed singles services, and crucially, how people squared the consumer aspect of romantic clienthood with the pursuit of a romantic connection. The evidence considered in Chapter Four leads me to reflect in closing on the long-term paradox inherent in dating services: the simultaneous virtuousness of taking control over romantic destiny and the immovability of fate in determining happiness.

In shifting the lens from couples to active daters, this thesis puts the emphasis on how people with everything to play for romantically negotiated their pursuit of a match. In doing so, it argues for a reformulation of the relationship between sexual change and feelings towards the opposite sex at the end of the 20th century as one of lag or ‘syncopation’ rather than either progress or stasis.

Chapter One: ‘Live alone and like it?’ Singleness in late 20th century Britain’¹

This is a thesis about singleness. The following two chapters focus on the singles industry and on singles themselves – their demands, aspirations and experience. This chapter explores the emergence of ‘the single’ after the 1970s, uncovering the bigger macro shifts that enabled the growth of the category alongside psychological formations related to broader trends. In drawing the contours of the social, cultural and emotional landscape in which many thousands of singles chose to deploy the services of matchmaking forums, this chapter makes a case for the emergence of a new single subjecthood after 1970. This was a unisex category whose key rubrics seemed to apply to both men and women. But given that romance was highly gendered (along with corollaries like loneliness and need) sexual differentials are key to the picture. Indeed Katherine Holden has underscored the gender polarities inherent in meanings attached to singleness in mid-century Britain, with her analysis resting on the terms ‘bachelor’ and ‘spinster’.² She uses ‘single’ descriptively as a synonym for unmarried; however, it wasn’t until the 1960s that the word was increasingly used to signify an identity. The rise of inward-looking selfhood over a collective or marital framework of duty has been a key marker for scholars of post-war life, while most agree that ‘individualism has been a driving force in Western democracies’.³ The decline in marriage, or ‘marriage crisis’ of the late 20th century West has been attributed to deepening individualism.⁴ For those who could afford it, the single state more than any might appear to offer individual freedom and privilege individual wants.⁵ However, the satisfaction of those wants and the enjoyment of those freedoms was not necessarily within reach of people whose economic, cultural and gendered outlook made singleness into a state of anxious uncertainty and self-doubt. This chapter therefore explores a double irony, stemming

¹Marjorie Hills, *Live Alone and Like It: A Guide For the Extra Woman* (London: Virago, 2005 [1937]). The book became a classic of the interwar period.

²Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), pp. 6-9.

³Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 3.

⁴Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Wellbeing in the United States and Britain Since 1950* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

⁵From a sizeable American literature on the challenging effects of late 20th century individualism and career ambition on relationships, see Milton Regan, *Family Law and the Pursuit of Intimacy* (New York: NYU Press, 1993); on the privileging of individualism within intimacy, Arlene and Jerome Skolnick, *Family in Transition* (New York: Pearson, 1980). For a German case study, see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

from the observation that the opportunities entailed in being single and ‘free’ were always framed by the promise of both sexual felicity on one hand and monogamous commitment on the other. This made being single stressful and sometimes sharpened the sense of loneliness, since the lack of sexual ties was compromised by conflicting feelings about, and opportunities for, actually accessing sexual liberty. Second, if – despite apparent freedoms – the single state could cause misery, the blame for this was attributed not to bad luck or fate but to a lack of emotional robustness and poor self-management on the part of the single herself.⁶

This chapter is a mixture of synthetic analysis and primary sources. A synthetic approach is used to draw together the variety of influences and themes I argue set the stage for the growth in number of singles, the development of the singles category, and of the dating industry. The sources brought together here range from social surveys to documentaries, and help me cross between different levels of culture and society, providing space for the voices of singles themselves, although these will be returned to in more depth in Chapter Four. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to do justice to the transatlanticism of intellectual trends in thinking about relationships, but it is important to note that many of the themes discussed here flowed from a more developed American relationships and singles discourse particularly around self-development and the psychology of love and mating. When such publications crossed the Atlantic, I have included them as a valid piece of evidence for considering the British scene.

Legal, social and cultural context

There is a plenitude of data on 20th century British life cycle events and sexual habits, norms and desires, interpreted in different ways by scholars from history and the social sciences.⁷ Key among these, at the start of the period, were Geoffrey Gorer’s *Sex and*

⁶*Singles* magazine’s regular feature, ‘Successful Single’, underscored the magazine’s view that through entrepreneurialism and pro-activity, singles could lift themselves up economically, socially and emotionally.

⁷British demographic data is ‘among the most complete in the world’, David Coleman, ‘Population and Family’, in Alan Halsey, Alan and Josephine Webb (eds), *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 27-93: 27. For interpretations, see Michael Anderson (1985), ‘The Emergence of the Modern Life Cycle In Britain’, *Social History*, 10 (1), pp. 69-87; Jacqueline Burgoyne, ‘Rethinking the Family Life Cycle: Sexual Divisions, Work and Domestic Life in the Post-war Period’ in Alan Bryman et al. (eds), *Rethinking the Life Cycle* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 72-87; Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London: Routledge, 2007),

Marriage in England Today (1970) and the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) 1 (1990) and 2 (2000) at the end.⁸ The outbreak of AIDS in the early 1980s prompted a new field of epidemiologically-urgent research into sexual habits. Indeed, taking a longer view of the post-war period, Liz Stanley has shown how vigorous the 20th century British sex survey tradition was, with Mass Observation forming an unprecedented sexually and methodologically progressive element in a field ‘fetishised’ in the 1950s and 1960s for its authority in explaining ‘what is happening’.⁹

Scholars differ over the causes and their periodization, but there is a consensus based on survey data and historical analysis that British people, like their American and European counterparts, conducted themselves differently in relation to their sexual and romantic lives after the 1960s, with the conceptual and practical detachment of marriage, sex and reproduction at the heart of this change.¹⁰ Demographic, legislative and activist milestones, including the 1970 launch of the British Women’s Liberation movement, need to be viewed together in order to appreciate the external and internal landscape faced by heterosexual singles in the period. The relationship between legislative change and behaviour is complicated and not necessarily direct.¹¹ Nevertheless, the raft of ‘permissive’ legislation, and ensuing legal modifications, informed the sexual vantage point from which single men and women both clashed with and sought each other out.

The movement towards gender equality was fractured and inevitably for many people – depending on generation, occupational, ethnic and regional community – confusing.¹² One broad shift was represented in a series of acts that formalised the ability to sever sex from its unwanted consequences. First came the Abortion Act of 1967, which

pp. 87-107; Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

⁸Geoffrey Gorer, *Sex and Marriage in England Today: A Study of the Views and Experience of the Under-45's* (London: Panther, 1973); Natsal-1 findings in Kaye Wellings et al., *Sexual Behaviour in Britain: The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* (London: Penguin, 1994), and Anne Johnson et al., *Sexual Attitudes & Lifestyles* (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1994).

⁹Liz Stanley, *Sex Surveyed, 1949-1994: From Mass-Observation's 'Little Kinsey' to the National Survey and the Hite Reports* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), pp. 8-9.

¹⁰Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role: The United Kingdom 1970-1990* (Oxford: OUP, 2010) p. 211; Weeks, *The World*, p. 104. For insistence on an earlier period of change in core sexual change in terms of reproductive norms, see Anderson, ‘Rethinking the life cycle’.

¹¹Yehezkel Dror (1959), ‘Law and Social Change’, *Tulane Law Review*, 33 (4), pp. 787-802. See discussion in Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage*, p. 23.

¹²Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London: Virago, 1987); for confusion over the new vocabularies of feminism in a political context see Joni Lovenduski (1996), ‘Sex, Gender and British Politics’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 49 (1), pp. 1-16.

legalised abortion without insisting on its provision by local authorities; with the 1974 NHS Reorganisation Act, family planning services were incorporated into the NHS, evening out provision around the country. The Pill, having become legally dispensable for all women in 1967, enjoyed a rapid uptake too – by 1989, over 80 per cent of women born between 1950 and 1959 had used the Pill.¹³ If the consequences of sexual choices had become less punitive (seen also in the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967), overall progress towards gender equality was uneven. The Equal Pay Act (1970) opened up opportunities for women, while the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 legislated against discrimination at work based on sex or marital status.

Yet if Britain appeared to be liberalising in important ways for women as well as men, then surveys of domestic and sexual life suggested that women's sexual and economic freedoms were not evenly taken up or distributed. In 1973, Young and Willmott found that men did less than 10 hours of housework a week, while wives did between 23 and 45 hours depending on whether they worked or not.¹⁴ Ann Oakley's 1974 study emphasised unequal division of labour between men and women, longer working weeks for housewives than for male workers, and high levels of dissatisfaction.¹⁵ By 1990, Ferri and Smith found that dual-earner households were the norm but that more than twice as many women as men were in part-time work, and that a significant number of women felt that their partners prioritised work over taking an equal share in household duties.¹⁶ Many women continued to face bullying and discrimination privately as well as publically – from the upper echelons of political culture, where Thatcher was elected to a house with 27 of 650 female MPs (this rose to 40 in 1990). High rates of domestic violence continued throughout the period.¹⁷

¹³Weeks, *The World*, p. 69.

¹⁴Peter Worsley, *The New Introducing Sociology* (London: Pelican, 1987), p. 158; Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family* (London: Keegan Paul, 1973), p. 13.

¹⁵Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (London: Robertson, 1974).

¹⁶Elsa Ferri and Kate Smith, *Parenting in the 1990s* (London: Family Policy Studies Centre, 1996)

See also Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (London: Piatkus, 1990), and Julie Brines (1993), 'The Exchange Value of Housework', *Rationality and Society*, 5 (3), pp. 302-340.

¹⁷Krista Jansson, *British Crime Survey – Measuring Crime For 25 Years* (London: HMSO, 2007), p. 12.

Singles: an emerging group

Singles were formulating their expectations of the opposite sex in a landscape of gender reconfiguration, but also – apparently – at a moment of particular promise. In the first place, the uncommitted seemed to be a growing group. Single people categorised as neither married, divorced nor widowed, accounted for 21 per cent of the population of England and Wales in 1970, and 30 per cent of it in 2000.¹⁸ This increase was more pronounced for ‘not married’ women aged 25–59, a group that increased from 18 per cent to 40 per cent of all women over the same period.¹⁹

The problem with such figures is that the ‘single’ classification included cohabitating or otherwise romantically entwined couples, while cohabitation figures themselves were marred by the informality of the term.²⁰ Coleman and Salt estimated that 12 per cent of unmarried men aged between 16 and 59 and 14 per cent of unmarried women in the same age bracket were cohabiting in the late 1980s, leaving a relatively high proportion of the total number of ‘singles’ as romantically non-committed.²¹ Indeed, singles – defined as single-person households – increased from 17 per cent of the total number of households in 1970, to a quarter of all households in 1989 to around 30 per cent in decade after 2000, though it is not clear from these figures what proportion of these were career singles who had never found a lasting partner or had children.²² However, market research firm Mintel subsequently shed some light on this question in a 1992 special report focussing exclusively on single-person households: *Single Person Households 1992: Single Living, Diverse Lifestyles*.²³ Mintel, using figures from the Central Statistics Office and Family Expenditure Survey, put the number of single person households at 6 million in 1992. Crucially, it differentiated between retired and non-retired singles, and among the non-retired, between pre-family (under 40) and post-

¹⁸Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, p. 317, table 13.1.

¹⁹Health Statistics Quarterly, Office of National Statistics (ONS), 42 (2009), p. 15. www.webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160111210900/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/hsq/health-statistics-quarterly/no--42--summer-2009/index.html

²⁰Albert Halsey et. al, *Origins and Destinations: Family, Class and Education in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 59; see discussion of definitional issues of singleness in Katherine Holden, *In the Shadow of Marriage*, p. 10.

²¹David Coleman and John Salt, *The British Population: Patterns, Trends and Processes* (London: Clarendon, 1991), p. 188.

²²Coleman and Salt, *British Population*, p. 217; second two figures from ‘Families and Households’ (2014), ONS, p. 10. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2015-01-28.

²³*Single Person Households: Single Living, Diverse Lifestyles*, Mintel International (London, 1992).

family singles, e.g. divorced, separated or widowed. It cited non-retired singles at between 11 and 13 per cent of all households, with single pensioners at 14-15 per cent.²⁴

Empirically it is clear that single people – both the technically unmarried and single householders pre and post-family – were a growing group between 1970 and 2000. But as Coleman and Salt remind us, people were (and are) single for ‘very different reasons’ across different age, social and income groups.²⁵ However, following the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, a surge in number of divorcees changed the profile of the numbers, a factor that contributed to the success of dating agencies.²⁶ From 50,000 divorces in 1970 to 150,000 roughly a decade later, the rise in divorce and consequent changes in family structure in the 1970s and 1980s has been widely documented.²⁷ By the 1980s, divorce supplanted death as the main reason for marital termination; indeed it had reached the same rates as death in marriage for those married at the average age in 1820.²⁸

The Mintel report underscored the potentially lucrative knowledge of singles’ spending patterns, but it was also forced to acknowledge the world of economic difference between the young and old and the rich and poor. Not only was it ‘a feature of single person households that they represent widely different lifestages’ and also that ‘a high proportion of single person households have low incomes (especially retired households on State pensions)’.²⁹ The Mintel report did not dwell on the well-chronicled poverty of elderly people living alone but instead developed the idea of a consumption-led model for thinking about singleness as a lifestyle.³⁰ The firm found that ‘those who are

²⁴Ibid., p. 1.

²⁵Coleman and Salt, *British Population*, p. 192.

²⁶‘The lonely hearts marry-go-round’, *The Daily Mail*, 2 Nov 1972, p. 2. The divorced customer base was also a central strand in John Cockburn’s investigation, *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (London: Guild, 1988).

²⁷‘Divorces in England and Wales, 2010’, ONS, p. 2. www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_246403.pdf.

²⁸Michael Anderson, ‘The emergence of the modern life cycle’, p. 78.

²⁹Mintel, *Single Person Households*, pp. 1 and 6.

³⁰For the experience of old age in mid-century Britain, see Charlotte Greenhalgh (2012), *An Age of Emotion: Expertise and Subjectivity in Old Age in Britain, 1937-1970*, PhD thesis, University of Oxford. The history and meanings of consumerism in Britain has attracted a large literature that spans the period since the late 16th century. Paul Glennie, ‘Consumption Within Historical Studies’ in Daniel Miller (Ed.), *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 163-203. For accounts of consumerism in the 20th century, informed by rising affluence, massification, and the rise of consumer rights, see John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London: Longman, 1994); Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search For a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003); Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*. Callum Brown blamed the ‘death throes’ of Christianity in the 1960s on expanding consumer choice. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 196.

comfortably off are particularly worth targeting as they generally have fewer responsibilities than others' and spent more on 'frivolous items' such as luxury pre-packaged foods, alcohol and tobacco and cinema trips.³¹ But the most significant finding of the report, and the most widely reported, was that single people appeared to feel highly positive about solo living. The never-married were the most positive, 'emphasising the freedom and sense of achievement in coping alone more than the loneliness'.³² The media embraced the opportunity to debate whether singleness was liberating or lonely, situating the debate within a longer-term social trend towards greater flexibility, individualisation and atomisation – a trend represented in part by the growing dating industry.³³ Moreover, it was evident that the Mintel report formed part of a broader shift in market research towards a qualitative concept of 'lifestyle' that increasingly focussed on affluent singles. Notably, marketing 'segmentation tool' ACORN (1977), built by marketing firm CACI, launched a Lifestyle List that classified every UK household according to a list of 81 'lifestyle segmentations', including 'affluent single metropolitan dwellers'.³⁴ SAGACITY and TGI pursued similar classification strategies, streamlining the way marketers thought about singles, and helping to cultivate and differentiate the category of 'the single' as a status of economic interest, foreshadowing the contemporary marketing forecasts of companies like LSN: Global, JWT Intelligence.³⁵

New opportunities and traditional desires

Daters – whether divorced, separated or first-timers – faced more than simply apparent strength in numbers. They seemed to be perfectly poised to take advantage of new options and experimentation in sexual and relational terms, as singles themselves sometimes vocally asserted. 'Women are now the hunters as much as men', observed a

³¹Mintel, *Single Person Households*, pp. 6 and 1.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³'Solitary pains and pleasures: Janet Watts examines whether her experiences match up to those portrayed in last week's report on people who live alone', *The Observer*, 20 Sep 1992, p. 48; 'Single file', *The Guardian*, 14 April, 1993, p. A9; and for earlier discussions, 'Alone again, naturally', *The Guardian*, 14 Oct, 1981, p. 10.

³⁴Excellent discussion of rise of more qualitative marketing tools in the 1970s and 1980s designed to navigate shifting patterns of consumer behaviour in Anna Gough Yates, *Understanding Women's Magazines: Publishing, Markets and Readerships* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 60-64.

³⁵'The Bridget Jones Economy', *The Economist*, 20 Dec 2001. www.economist.com/node/883664.

reader of *Singles* magazine, in 1977.³⁶ By 1980, 'getting girls into bed' was 'not to be confused with love and romance just in case you were misguided enough to think they had anything in common'.³⁷ Statistical indicators of new norms included the lowering age of first intercourse and a softening in attitudes towards pre-marital sex.³⁸ A 'genuine' generational shift among those born in the 1960s and 1970s emerged in Natsal-1 data showing that significantly more women between 20 and 34 years old had had 5-9 sexual partners compared with the 72 per cent having had just one among their elders aged 50-59.³⁹ This supports Geoffrey Gorer's findings among young people in 1969, of which 63 per cent of women reported themselves to be virgins at marriage.⁴⁰ Jane Lewis neatly describes a picture of sweeping change in the generation growing up in the 1970s and 1980s: 'the numbers marrying have halved, the numbers divorcing have trebled and the proportion of children born outside marriage has quadrupled'.⁴¹ However, there are two generations here, both of whom contributed to the overall sense of change between 1970 and 2000: Gorer's young adults and Lewis's. The first were born between the 1920s and the early 1950s, and were sixteen or older before the start of the sexual upheaval of the 1970s, while those discussed by Lewis were born later, becoming the first generation to begin their pre-marital sex lives with the Pill. This generational divergence in experiences of singleness and sexuality in this period highlights the need to consider age and romantic history together to some extent, as the analysis in Chapter Four indicates.

Yet the overall sense at the start of the 1970s that singles faced options like never before was enhanced by popular and high culture, with reams of investigations of 'permissiveness' among journalists and sociologists and successful cultural phenomena celebrating its ideals of sexual liberty, personal discovery and pleasure.⁴² Alex Comfort's *The Joy Of Sex*, though directed at couples, is still a prime example of the genre in which more sexual experimentation rather than less was the watchword.

³⁶*Singles*, 3 (Aug 1977), p. 16.

³⁷*Singles*, 38 (July 1980), p. 17.

³⁸Wellings, *Sexual Behaviour in Britain: The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles*, fig. 2.2, pp. 43 and 98.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁰Gorer, *Sex and Marriage*, p. 47.

⁴¹Lewis, *End of Marriage?*, p. 4.

⁴²Robert Millar, *The New Classes* (London: Longmans, 1966), p. 31; *The Permissive Society: The Guardian Inquiry* (London: Panther Modern Society 1969); Marcus Collins (Ed.), *The Permissive Society and its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007).

In this thesis I argue that the relationship between broad sexual change and individual attitudes and feelings about the gender order in the decades after 1970 requires closer analysis. Empirical evidence further supports the view that a complicated relationship existed between changing relational norms and romantic attitudes.⁴³ As we have seen, the period between the 1960s and the 2000s saw the parameters of sexual behaviour completely change.⁴⁴ New forms of intimacy replaced the old marriage-only model, with sex becoming, in Avner Offer's brusque terms, 'part of the non-committal and casual practice of serial mating'.⁴⁵ But the ideal of what John Gillis called 'conjuality' – in which 'the couple...is the standard for all intimate relationships, the unmarried and the married' – was not in fact considerably weakened either by greater sexual freedom or the heightened ethic of individualism linked to it in the late 20th century.⁴⁶ Couples took seriously their moral obligations, especially when children were involved, and preferred monogamy, even when they weren't married.⁴⁷

The increasing popularity of cohabitation throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, as a precursor and an alternative to marriage, is routinely stressed as a sign of liberalisation as well as growing individualism.⁴⁸ But the popularity of cohabitation hardly signals a radical or even a significant rejection of monogamous commitment among heterosexuals.⁴⁹ In the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles II (Natsal-2) compiled 1999-2001, the majority of cohabiting people stated that their 'ideal relationship in five years time' was marriage, with no other sex partners (57.9 per cent of cohabiting men; 60 per cent of cohabiting women).⁵⁰ Among singles at the time, 34

⁴³While sexual theories and sexual practice have alternatively outpaced each other throughout history, the late 20th century – with its tardy decriminalisation of homosexuality on one hand and the discursive din of permissiveness on the other – is certainly a period in which picking apart the relationship between the two is challenging. For a nuanced attempt at doing so, see Langhamer (2006), 'Adultery in Post-War England', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (1), pp. 86-115: 88 and 89.

⁴⁴Lewis, *The End of Marriage?*, p. 4.

⁴⁵Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, p. 314.

⁴⁶John Gillis, *For Better or Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 3.

⁴⁷Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason, *Negotiating Family Responsibilities* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1993), pp. 29-97.

⁴⁸Lewis, *End of Marriage*, pp. 3-5; D.J. Van de Kaa (1987), 'Europe's Second Demographic Transition', *Population Bulletin*, 42 (1), pp. 1-59, Stephen Brooke (2014), 'Living in "New Times": Historicizing 1980s Britain', *History Compass*, 12 (1), pp. 20-32: 23.

⁴⁹Thorough discussion of similarities and differences between cohabiting and married couples in Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage?* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002) pp. 29-43.

⁵⁰Bob Erens et. al., *National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles II: Reference Tables and Summary Report* (National Centre for Social Research: April 2003).

per cent of men and 31.3 per cent of women desired monogamous cohabitation with a live-in partner five years down the line and 39.7 per cent of single men and 45.7 per cent of single women wanted to be monogamously married. Only 1.6 per cent of single men and 0.8 per cent of single women wanted 'no regular partners but casual partners when I feel like it'; 2.4 per cent of single men and 0.3 per cent of married men wanted a few regular partners; these were 0.2 and 1.6 per cent for women, respectively. Overall, non-monogamous relationships were cited as ideal by one in eight men and one in 20 women.⁵¹ These figures varied by age, class and region, with class representing the most suggestive differences. Both men and women in 'social class I' – the professional elite – preferred relational monogamy, and particularly marriage, to those in class V, who also substantially preferred the idea of living apart from the partner in five years. This may be to do with the greater strain of shared financial life among those with low potentially unstable employment.⁵² So while the sexual options available to the unmarried had undoubtedly expanded, and were being utilised (as evidenced in the lower age of first intercourse, for instance), these figures suggest that sexual opportunity in this period was overlaid with the expectation of the monogamy of a traditional marriage.

Table 8.8 Ideal relationship in five years time, by marital status*

Base: All

	Men				Women			
	Marital status				Marital status			
	Married	Cohabiting: opposite sex partner	Divorced, separated widowed	Single	Married	Cohabiting: opposite sex partner	Divorced, separated widowed	Single
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Prefer to have no sex activity	0.5	0.3	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.4	1.6	1.2
No regular partners but casual partners when I feel like it	0.4	0.4	3.0	1.6	0.2	0.3	1.3	0.8
A few regular partners	0.3	0.7	1.4	2.4	0.2	0.1	0.7	1.6
One regular partner but not living together	1.0	1.5	16.6	13.8	1.7	1.6	25.3	14.7
Not married, but living with a partner and with some sex activity outside the partnership	0.6	4.3	2.5	5.4	0.3	2.3	1.0	2.9
Not married, but living with a partner, and no other sex partners	0.7	32.9	29.8	34.0	0.7	33.7	27.8	31.3
Married, with some sex activity outside the marriage	7.2	2.0	3.4	2.3	2.6	1.4	0.9	1.7
Married, with no other sex partners	89.4	57.9	42.5	39.7	93.9	60.0	41.6	45.7
<i>Bases (weighted)</i>	2225	871	232	2165	2381	966	404	1594
<i>Bases (unweighted)</i>	1540	608	302	2124	2455	974	685	2089

*Due to small base, respondents with a same-sex cohabiting partner are excluded from the table.

*Figure 1: Ideal relationship in five years time by marital status, Natsal-2.*⁵³

⁵¹Ibid., p. 14 and p. 82, table 8.8.

⁵²For the stresses of marriage, particularly on the woman, of the working class male breadwinner model, see Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁵³Bob Erens et. al., *National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles II*, p. 82.

Table 8.10 Ideal relationship in five years time, by social class

Base: All (except those who had no job in last 10 years)

	Social class					
	I	II	IIINM	IIIM	IV	V
Men	%	%	%	%	%	%
Prefer to have no sex activity	-	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.9	0.9
No regular partners but casual partners when I feel like it	-	0.1	0.8	1.9	1.6	0.5
A few regular partners	0.1	0.9	1.0	0.9	1.3	2.2
One regular partner but not living together	4.1	3.5	6.9	5.1	8.3	6.2
Not married, but living with a partner and with some sex activity outside the partnership	2.6	2.6	4.1	2.7	3.2	4.5
Not married, but living with a partner, and no other sex partners	15.4	16.5	23.7	19.5	23.0	20.3
Married, with some sex activity outside the marriage	4.2	4.5	3.6	4.3	6.2	4.8
Married, with no other sex partners	73.5	71.7	59.3	65.1	55.5	60.6
Women						
Prefer to have no sex activity	0.4	0.4	0.7	1.0	0.7	1.0
No regular partners but casual partners when I feel like it	-	0.3	0.2	0.8	0.5	0.9
A few regular partners	-	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.2
One regular partner but not living together	3.2	4.6	5.0	8.1	8.2	10.0
Not married, but living with a partner and with some sex activity outside the partnership	0.9	1.2	1.2	1.6	1.5	2.5
Not married, but living with a partner, and no other sex partners	12.3	15.0	16.9	17.1	21.0	15.7
Married, with some sex activity outside the marriage	3.0	2.0	1.9	2.9	1.6	1.8
Married, with no other sex partners	80.3	76.3	73.9	68.4	66.1	68.0
<i>Bases (weighted)</i>						
Men	381	1469	652	1517	721	240
Women	153	1254	1745	387	838	212
<i>Bases (unweighted)</i>						
Men	322	1268	565	1188	601	204
Women	200	1546	1996	443	952	246

Figure 2: Ideal relationship in five years time by social class, Natsal-2.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, despite rates falling, marriage retained an enthusiastic, large-scale following. In 1982, an inquiry carried out by the Study Commission on the Family found that 90 per cent of young people expected to marry.⁵⁵ Scholars such as Sharon Boden, Chrys Ingraham and Celia Lury have analysed the attachment to marriage as a growing consumer obsession with the wedding as a collection of symbols asserting heteronormative romance.⁵⁶ Certainly, the public response to Princess Diana's wedding – watched by 750m people globally – implied if anything an intensifying conception of marriage as a fairy-tale, whose universality and widespread problems did nothing to

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 83.⁵⁵'Values and the changing family: a final report from the working party on values', Study Commission on the Family (London, 1982), p. 15.⁵⁶Sharon Boden, *Consumerism, Romance and the Wedding Experience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); Celia Lury, 'A Public Romance: "the Charles and Di story"' in Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Romance Revisited* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), pp. 225-238.

dent its popular appeal and perhaps even enhanced it.⁵⁷ Weddings, which decreased throughout the 1980s and 1990s, became more expensive, reaching £16,000-£17,000 on average in the UK in 2005.⁵⁸ Feminist scholars Jacki Stacey and Lynne Pearce, who organised a British conference on romance in 1993, recalled a media frenzy stemming from the ‘combined fascination and anxiety with romantic love...against all the odds (social, political, intellectual).’⁵⁹ Susan Faludi argued that a heightening in the discourse on the benefits of coupledness and marriage in the 1980s and 1990s particularly targeted single women.⁶⁰

So far this chapter has attempted to explore some of the empirical evidence of change in heterosexual relationality in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, focussing on single person households, divorce, and attitudes to cohabitation. I now turn to the psychological and cultural context surrounding singles. I investigate first the emergence of new theories of self and relationship; second, trends in thinking about couples and coupling, and third, perceptions of singleness. I argue that increased romantic choice combined with greater pressure to exploit its potential produced a paradox which shaped the development not just of marital disharmony as has been widely argued, but of the modern British single. Echoing a Foucauldian idea of sexual liberalisation, I suggest that for many singles in this period, the appearance of greater freedom actually meant new forms of constraint. Singles experienced self-inflicted pressure to take control over romantic destiny, the fear of ending up alone, genuine loneliness and the sense of being socially abnormal. These factors informed singles’ turn to mediated dating and helped the industry grow.

‘The age of the meaningful relationship’: self and other⁶¹

Romantic relationships have been widely historicised through a shift from the ‘self-overcoming’ marriage-oriented to a model of ‘inward-looking authenticity’, in which people sought more in terms of personal development and happiness from their

⁵⁷On romance narratives shaping national stories about Diana and Charles, see Lury, ‘A Public Romance’.

⁵⁸Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*, p. 311.

⁵⁹Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Romance Revisited*, pp. 9 and 11.

⁶⁰Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 21-66.

⁶¹David Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), p. 6.

relationships.⁶² Scholars differ over when the shift occurred, with some rooting it in the pre-Freudian period and some directly as a result of Freud.⁶³ Claire Langhamer has most recently and thoroughly made the case for the mid-century period as the moment in which love and marriage became burdened with greater expectations for self-realisation.⁶⁴

The quest for authenticity in feeling and experience, however, has longer roots.⁶⁵ Twentieth century critics such as Theodor Adorno mocked what he saw as the obsession with the authentic in Germany, particularly in relation to emotion; Queenie Leavis had also despaired at modern readers' critical metric of the 'touching' and 'the true'.⁶⁶ Yet if the older discourse was principally concerned with either shallow sentimentality or the labelling of abnormality and the assignment of pathologies, the 'individual' gradually took on new resonances throughout the 20th century, extending into the vernacular, the personal and the everyday.⁶⁷ Langhamer has suggested some of the ways in which ideas of individual psychic wellbeing shaped the vocabularies surrounding love in the 1940s and 1950s. Her map of evolving models of selfhood and self-actualisation in mid-century Britain concerns the desire to find betterment in an emotional, not a clinical sense: 'love promised an emotional connectivity which would

⁶²Matthew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 250; see also Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), and Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶³Illouz focuses on Freud's American Clark Lectures in 1909 as a key turning point, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), pp. 5-16.

⁶⁴Langhamer, *The English in Love*, 'Love, Selfhood and Authenticity in Post-war Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9 (2), 293; for a similar chronology in the American context, see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, Or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005). Longer chronologies foregrounding individual satisfaction in love include Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Atlantic, 2001).

⁶⁵Matthew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p. 250; Nikolas Rose, *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England, 1869-1939* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 3.

⁶⁶Queenie Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), p. 221; Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

⁶⁷Alison Miller's illuminating study (2013) of tomboy bodies in 1930s America offers one variant of vernacularisation, focussing on the development of an institutional 'vernacular' of sexology: 'Am I Normal? American Vernacular Psychology and the Tomboy Body, 1900-1940', *Representations*, 122 (1), pp. 23-50.

improve those involved by creating something more than the sum of its parts: the co-actualizing heterosexual couple.’⁶⁸

Langhamer’s framework feeds into the broader chronology of psychology suggested by Matthew Thomson, who has argued that the discourse of the knowable, treatable self changed significantly in the 1960s and 1970s, although never uniformly.⁶⁹ Critics in this period took aim at the expanding remit of the self. In 1971, AE Dyson attacked contemporary education, born of the requirements of the welfare state, for its ‘labyrinthine...self-analysis’: ‘the modern ‘self’ is at once too sacred and too shattered to be pulled together in old-fashioned ways’.⁷⁰ The push to ‘self-actualise’ in the 1970s and 1980s was also widely linked to the spread of the ‘the therapeutic attitude’, manifested in a wealth of new publications, wide-ranging discussion of psychological factors in social, political, personal and medical spheres, and a quadrupling of mental health professionals between 1970 and 1995 in both the US and Britain.⁷¹ If the connection with therapy per se is overstated given how few could either contemplate or afford private therapy, then the pressure on individuals to ‘be and use all one’s essence’ in ‘mobilizing’ themselves was more diffuse.⁷² Although self-actualisation did not necessarily implicate sexual union, the two concepts overlapped, with romantic success seen as a fulfilling, equal partnership as well as a sexually meaningful, compatible one. As the more countercultural ‘personal growth’ movement developed in Britain in the early 1970s following the proliferation of American centres like Esalen in Big Sur, the greater stress on getting in touch with the true self involved increasing focus on physical and more specifically sexual experience.⁷³ This went far beyond fringe movements. *Company* magazine’s first ‘book of the month’, in its inaugural October 1978 issue, was *Self Creation* by Dr George Weinberg with a lengthy section on ‘How To Get More Out

⁶⁸Langhamer, ‘Love, selfhood and authenticity’, p. 278.

⁶⁹Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p. 252.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 254; A.E. Dyson and Brian Cox, *The Black Papers on Education* (London: 1971), p. 86.

⁷¹Frank Furedi *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 10. For a discussion of anti-therapy culture discourse, see Hera Cook, ‘Complaining About Therapy Culture’, in Jonathan Reinartz and Rebecca Winter (eds), *Complaints, Controversies and Grievances in Medicine: Historical and Social Science Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 56-75. Thomson argues that therapeutic practice spread relatively slowly in Britain until the late 1970s, when a boom occurred with 5,500 registered psychotherapists by 1999, up from 500 in 1976, *Psychological Subjects*, p. 252.

⁷²John Rowan, *Ordinary Ecstasy: Humanistic Psychology in Action* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 62 and 64.

⁷³History of ‘personal growth’ centres in Britain and the US, and detailed description of their activities also in Rowan, *Ordinary Ecstasy*, pp. 39, 7 and 137; see also Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p. 275.

of Sex', which ran alongside a piece called 'How To Love and How To Succeed'.⁷⁴ Other featured books included *Getting Together: A Guide To Sexual Enrichment for Couples*.⁷⁵ Marje Proops, while noting that 'the importance of good sex in marriage cannot, of course, be minimised', was 'disturbed by the modern tendency to overestimate its importance and what I regard as the wrong emphasis all too often placed on it by psychologists and counsellors'.⁷⁶

In such light, David Shumway's designation of the 1970s and 1980s as the age of 'the meaningful relationship' seems apt; the prevalence of the word 'meaningful', alongside 'sincere', 'lasting' 'caring' in lonely hearts ads even irked some onlookers.⁷⁷ Certainly there was overlap between the politicised 'self-actualisation' of the countercultural humanistic movement and more mainstream attitudes to coupling up: reflecting on his trade in the 1980s, the lonely hearts ad manager at the *New Statesman* believed that advertisers, 'at least in the serious magazines', were using the pages 'as part of the self-awareness movement' and to 'explore their selfhoods'.

Some advertisers are regular users of the Heartsearch columns and come back with several ads a year. They experiment with image and 'stage' a new one every time. They've turned ad design into a kind of art form and try out different wordings, styles and designs; it's part of self-exploration. The same people also answer ads in abundance because they enjoy writing about themselves...each letter is a voyage of discovery. Some people write ten letters of reply over the weekend about themselves. They arrive here on Tuesdays and we send them on.⁷⁸

The framing of the modern self in relation to romantic relationality was to change in other ways too. The magazine *Psychology*, which tellingly became *Psychology and Successful Living* in the mid-1960s, increasingly turned away from the traditional question of the self's inherently political and ethical relation to society, and towards the body and sexual success. As Thomson has observed, vegetarianism and clothing reform were replaced by lifestyle guides to looking and feeling good.⁷⁹ Another trend, represented by the launch of *Psychology Today* in Britain in 1975, saw the normative

⁷⁴George Weinberg, *Self Creation* (London: Raven Books, 1978); 'How to love and succeed', *Company*, 1 (Oct 1978), p. 47.

⁷⁵Leon Zussman, *Getting Together* (New York: William Morrow, 1978).

⁷⁶Marje Proops, *Dear Marje* (London: Coronet, 1977), pp. 39 and 40.

⁷⁷Shumway, *Modern Love*, p. 6; *Company*, 1 (Oct 1978), p. 85.

⁷⁸Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 24.

⁷⁹Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p. 262.

aims of social and spiritual healing through psychological insight replaced by a focus on digestible updates in new science and research. Nonetheless, one of *Psychology Today*'s central aims was, according to Thomson, providing 'insights for self-development'.⁸⁰ By the mid-1980s, a series of new women's magazines were targeting a readership that was 'vulnerable', 'self-critical' and 'insecure inside'. *Cosmopolitan* expanded its 'Zest' section for the woman focussed on 'herself' and 'relationships', as well as 'maintenance of body, soul and appearance' and therefore desirous of the insights of popular psychology.⁸¹

According to some commentators, individualism had come to sit at the heart of ideas of romantic love, and the desire to explore the self through love and sex was therefore inherently compromised.⁸² American sociologist Robert Bellah argued that love between 'self-actualised persons' was incompatible with compromise.⁸³ Indeed the idea that late 20th century people had become more selfish – wanting more materially and spiritually out of life – has been a magnet for scholars of love and intimacy from Giddens to Bauman. Marilyn Strathern's concept of 'hyper-individualism', arising from the politics of Thatcherism, made the pursuit of an inherently compromising formation – coupledness – seem even more paradoxical in the 1980s and afterwards.⁸⁴ Those outside academia could be even more damning about perceived selfishness.⁸⁵ As Jane Lewis has pointed out, late 20th century people had not morphed from self-denying to selfish, but changing patterns of selfhood accompanying numerous cultural, institutional and normative shifts had re-calibrated the meanings, stresses and desires associated with partner-hunting.⁸⁶

⁸⁰Ibid. p. 263. However, as Lucy Delap has shown in her study of anti-sexist men's responses to feminism through support groups and co-counselling, therapy had not lost its politically revolutionary potential for the far left: Delap (forthcoming) "I didn't know where to look": Feminism and emotional politics in the late twentieth century', *Cultural and Social History*. See also Thomson on Laing, anti-psychiatry, 'humanistic' psychology and counterculture, *Psychological Subjects*, pp. 270-278.

⁸¹Anna Gough Yates, *Understanding Women's Magazines*, p. 27.

⁸²This idea particularly preoccupied US observers. Arlene Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: OUP, 1989).

⁸³Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Middle America Observed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁸⁴Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 12.

⁸⁵Baroness Young, House of Lords, Debates, 29 Feb 1996, c. 1638.

⁸⁶Lewis, *The End of Marriage?* p. 4.

Pleasure and fulfilment: the pressure to pair up

Single people in the 1970s and afterwards were under great pressure to remedy their situation for a variety of reasons. As Langhamer has suggested, from the middle of the century, a variety of discourses – from agony columns to marriage council materials – increasingly urged heterosexual commitment to heed the ethic of authentic, true love. Yet by the 1970s, fresh importance was being assigned to ‘conjuality’.⁸⁷ Following Holden’s insistence that singleness is defined in relation to coupledness, these new ideas inevitably had implications for the self-perceptions of those outside relationships. Emotional connection would bring important forms of personal development, while spiritual balm was to be attained through suitably liberated coitus – Alex Comfort’s *Joy of Sex* offered not simply a how-to but an ‘ethic’ of sex for ‘people who knew something about sex but wanted to know it all’, for a deeper experience of life’s pleasures.⁸⁸

The sex-as-self media discourse and psychologically-themed writing seemed excessive to some. The sociologist Maurice North felt that the idea of self-fulfilment through sex had been developing for nearly 70 years, identifying DH Lawrence as ‘the high priest of the religion of fulfilment by sex’.⁸⁹ Yet the 1970s, when North was writing, marked a culmination of a century of evolving professional, quasi-professional, creative, social-scientific and everyday interest in the experience of heterosexual union. At the close of the decade, literary and film scholar Stephen Heath wrote: ‘I’ve suffered and suffer and I think others must too – it’s difficult not to in our society – from ‘sexuality’, the whole sexual fix. To the point of nausea’.⁹⁰ The emphasis on sexuality as a key platform in the relatively new field of identity politics may have been particularly felt among the academic avant-garde such as Heath.⁹¹ But over-emphasis on sex and sexuality fatigued and dismayed more down-to-earth figures; in her reflections on its ubiquity, Proops, writing in 1976, would be unexpectedly echoed by Germaine Greer’s preface to the 21st anniversary edition of *The Female Eunuch*. ‘People have been encouraged to expect such perfection, such expertise that those who fail to achieve it can only feel a powerful

⁸⁷Gillis, *For Better or Worse*.

⁸⁸Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex* (London: Quartet, 1974), pp. 6-7, cited in Ben Mechen, (2015) *Everyday Sex in 1970s Britain*, PhD thesis, UCL, p. 175.

⁸⁹Maurice North, *The Secular Priests*, (London: Allen and Unwin), p. 79.

⁹⁰Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

⁹¹North, *Secular Priests*, p. 81.

and damaging sense of failure,’ wrote Proops. ‘The modern approach to sex has made it seem one of achievement. It has become a technology, a test, a performance, a kind of contest instead of a demonstration and culmination of tenderness and emotion’.⁹² As Marcus Collins has shown, erotic material also proliferated in the decade, while according to Maurice North, ‘the legitimating of sexual freedom’ resulted in a ‘public pornography’ in which sex pervaded ‘advertising, dancing and pop music, in the theatre, television and publishing’ in ways never before so obvious and untrammelled.⁹³ The ‘public legitimization of almost all varieties of sexual experimentation’ was, according to Joseph Bensman, evident even in coarser language.⁹⁴

Women and singleness

The pressure on women to pair up was particularly visible, conveyed explicitly through popular periodicals of the period and more indirectly in a variety of media promoting ways of being attractive, from makeup to diets.⁹⁵ The most notable of the women’s magazines was *Cosmopolitan*, which was unique in directly targeting relationships and sex under an explicitly liberatory banner, although *Woman’s Own*, an older publication and a weekly, was also concerned ‘that as women we should be “our own woman”’.⁹⁶ Launched in 1972 in Britain, *Cosmopolitan* reached a circulation of 440,000 by the middle of the decade and, although circulation fell at the end of the 1970s, it remained the monthly women’s magazine market leader into the 1980s.⁹⁷ *Cosmopolitan*’s messages were various and often contradictory, but the idea that ‘there is no life without a man’ was persistent throughout the 1970s, and later affixed to the magazine’s ailing health in the following, ‘post-feminist’ decade.⁹⁸ The magazine’s substructure revolved

⁹²*Dear Marje*, p. 40; Greer wrote of the need for ‘Freedom from the duty of sexual stimulation of jaded male appetite, for which no breast ever bulges hard enough and no leg is ever long enough. Freedom from the uncomfortable clothes that must be worn to titillate. Freedom from clothes that must be worn to titillate. Freedom from shoes that make us shorten our steps and push our buttocks out. Freedom from the ever-present juvenile pulchritude’. *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 10.

⁹³North, *Secular Priests*, p. 75; Collins, ‘Marcus Collins (1999), ‘The Pornography of Permissiveness: Men’s Sexuality and Women’s Emancipation in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain’, *History Workshop Journal*, (47), pp. 99-120.

⁹⁴Cited in North, *The Secular Priests*, p. 76.

⁹⁵Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* linked such implicit and explicit messages with pressure on women to conform to patriarchal tradition. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Chatto and Windus, 1990). This argument was also echoed in Faludi’s *Backlash*.

⁹⁶Janice Winship, *Inside Women’s Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 81.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁹⁸Gough Yates, *Understanding Women’s Magazines*, p. 111.

around material both sexually explicit and forthright, threaded through with stories whose moral was that both staying single and pairing with the wrong person could damage physical as well as mental health.

The uneasy attitude to female singleness was more pronounced in *Woman's Own*. In perhaps its 'one' attempt at celebrating 'the growing number of single people', the magazine set up the consensus view that 'we used to be slightly sorry for single people.'⁹⁹ Of course, all they really wanted was a husband or wife to cosset and care for'.¹⁰⁰ Tentatively following up on 'research' showing that 'singles today are happier, healthier and more fulfilled than their married friends' – happiness, health and fulfilment being the cornerstones of coupling up correctly – the magazine noted with clear detachment, suggested by the quote marks, that 'women aren't "required" to marry any longer'.¹⁰¹ Yet the argument that it might be better point blank to stay single was eclipsed by the argument that some marriages were just as lonely too. Marriage was no guarantee for happiness, but the idea that even a good marriage may not be as rewarding as single life was firmly shut out. 'There are obvious problems about being unattached,' said a quoted expert, psychologist Mike Gossop. 'Having someone else to confide in and lean on when necessary is a very important psychological support. But it would be naïve to imagine you always get that in a marriage.'¹⁰²

Contradictions in the way women were encouraged to think about romantic status reflected the wider confusion over what opportunities could or should be accessed by singles. These contradictions came through in the debates that revolved around gender. Embracing the changes in gender politics to emerge from feminism was portrayed as a key means for women to access emotional modernity – but feminism also always threatened to undermine sexual difference and therefore ruin romance and happiness. An example of the contradictory treatment of feminism in relation to romance was in coverage of marriage and wifedom, in which the idea that giving up 'everything for one man' was not only unwise but unmodern too. 'Now I've learned to love myself,' wrote a *Company* reader in 1982, 'I am confident, and know that I can and will cope. In my

⁹⁹Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁰*Woman's Own*, 10 July 1983, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

opinion, self-respect is the most worthy ally any woman can have'.¹⁰³ In a 'going out alone guide', the journalist noted that 'unfortunately, some of us still have difficulty thinking of ourselves as independent. We've got stuck with the notion that it's only OK to be seen at somebody else's side'.¹⁰⁴ *Company* often seemed to take female liberation as a fait accompli, and was more genuine in its support for women choosing to be single or single for other reasons: cover stories such as 'Ways to meet men now you are liberated', 'Why it's ok now to be a femme fatale' and 'How to be lonely in London', if optimistic, were often more sincere than those in *Cosmopolitan*.¹⁰⁵ Singleness, as Janice Winship has argued, was nonetheless glamourised in *Cosmopolitan*, but as a platform from which carefully modulated 'permissive' behaviour and certain types of consumption (cigarettes, holidays, fashion) could be best enjoyed.¹⁰⁶

Sexually, too, singleness was both opportunity and danger, and needed careful management. Women could be vixens for a time, but to a purpose of pairing up.¹⁰⁷ While *Cosmopolitan* endorsed sexual exploration, the promotion of promiscuity was curtailed, with the emphasis often on pleasing 'your' man rather than pleasing many men.¹⁰⁸ When the man-eater model was condoned, it was done so under the banner of celebrity glamour. Actress Sarah Miles, for instance, was billed as 'the cool man-eater', in an article written, typically, by a man.¹⁰⁹ More often, worrying confessional stories of nymphomania – as both psychological and physical compulsion – were printed.¹¹⁰ Messages were persistently mixed, with back-to-back articles promoting sexual qualities for ambient application, and marriage. Readers were offered a quiz, 'How sexy are you?', and an avowal of their sexual power ('Girls, you and your body are driving me mad'), followed by 'What I want in a wife' – according to 'forty trappable bachelors'.¹¹¹ Above all, the woman of 1972 was responsible for developing her sex life and the pressure to do so became as strong as the pressure to look attractive. However, weeklies like *Love Affair*, 'The New Weekly of Real-Life Romances!', launched in

¹⁰³ *Company*, Jan 1982, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Jan 1982, p. 60.

¹⁰⁵ *Company*, April 1979 and Nov 1978.

¹⁰⁶ See male-authored quiz, 'Are you really permissive?', *Cosmopolitan*, Aug 1972, p. 47. Questions were not actually focussed on sex, but include views on capital punishment, religion and mixed-race conception.

¹⁰⁷ Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁸ 'These women are dangerous', *Cosmopolitan*, May 1972, p. 95.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Miles- 'The cool man-eater', *Ibid.*, April 1972, p. 78.

¹¹⁰ 'I was a sleep-around girl'; *Ibid.*, March 1972, p. 72; 'The Sexually Obsessed Girl', Oct 1972, p. 71.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, April 1972, p. 55; then *Ibid.*, pp. 58 and 63.

1971, more straightforwardly capitalised on the idea that every woman dreams of romance and desires marriage. *Love Affair*, unlike *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Weekly*, was uninterested in what feminism might offer, harking back to the interests of teen magazines such as *Jackie*, *Honey*, *Marilyn*, *Roxy*, *Valentine* and *Boyfriend* and to the narrative genre of Harlequin romances, gothic novels and other forms of 'mass produced fantasies for women'.¹¹²

Experts

Lifestyle magazines alert us to the ways in which heterosexual pairing figured in the tug of war between normative and contested discourses of gender directed at women, and how those discourses were shaped through the quasi-expertise of journalist, fashion editor, agony aunt and first-person confessor. Yet the evolution of the post-1960s relationship wisdom that contextualised singleness in the period – generally by promoting the benefits (rather than the propriety) of monogamous pairings – extended beyond women's literature, especially via the amateur expert.¹¹³ A measure of the burgeoning involvement of both experts as well as ordinary people in the drama of relationship formation and maintenance, as well as failure on both counts, was in the surprisingly vigorous trajectory of the agony column. Marje Proops, *The Daily Mirror* agony aunt and activist, noted that despite the proliferation of family services and sexually educative information in the 1970s, she and her colleagues were filling a 'vast need' left unanswered by both church and state.¹¹⁴

As Angela Phillips has underlined, agony aunts are 'the lightning conductors of social unease. They listen to what has been unsayable, and in listening and then reproducing these forbidden discourses, they bring them into the realm of the "normal" and

¹¹²Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies For Women* (London: Routledge, 2007); Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History and Feminism* (London: Zed, 2010) and *Heartthrobs: A History of Women and Desire* (Oxford: OUP, 2017).

¹¹³It should be remembered that *Woman's Own* and *Cosmopolitan* had a substantial number of male readers, one-third of *Cosmopolitan's* were men, and one million of *Woman's Own's* five-six million readers were men in 1987, Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines*, p. 5.

¹¹⁴*Dear Marje*, p. 7. Advice bodies included the National Family Planning Service, while information was available for those who knew where to look in a raft of surveys such as Gorer, *Sex and Marriage*, Michael Schofield, *The Sexual Behaviour of Young Adults* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), and Karen Dunnell, *Family Formation* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976). Sex education, however, continued to be a highly vexed arena, however, as the vitriolic response to Dr Martin Cole's *Growing Up* video of 1971 shows. Disc sleeve, *The Joy of Sex Education* (BFI, 2009).

sayable'.¹¹⁵ Agony aunts of the 1970s reflected but also influenced the views and experiences of a substantial number of Britons. Their increasingly liberal attitudes to sex, marriage and singleness, particularly where women were concerned, were therefore a social force extending well beyond newsprint, and a key part of the relational context in which singles of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s set about their search for love. Their own reflections, some of which are considered here, point to the urgency with which people were trying to make sense of themselves and their situations in relation to a prevailing belief that getting sex right was vital to happiness.

The trajectory of the agony aunts themselves point to the growing emphasis on having more sex and better sex. Bingham has identified several phases in the popularity of agony columns, with a wide-ranging popularity by the 1930s and 1940s for columns that, nonetheless, kept to strict moral discipline. The 1960s saw more earnest emphasis on open mindedness and female sexuality.¹¹⁶ Proops declared of sexual union:

Without it (or without the best of it) life is arid, boring, wearying, unenticing, uneventful, uninspiring. With it (or the best of it) life is rewarding, exciting, moving, amusing, exhilarating and splendid. Those who maintain the myth that sex isn't everything have my profound pity.¹¹⁷

By 1974, the *News of the World* had assembled 'a team of 100 experts' and the section cost £100,000 a year to run, while Marje Proops had a team of 'eight dedicated girls'.¹¹⁸ In 1974, Claire Rayner at *The Sun* estimated that she received between 700 and 1,500 letters per week.¹¹⁹ In 1976, Proops reflected that 'close to a million people have written to me'.¹²⁰ Proops avoided a purely cultural analysis of the huge demand for her services, stressing neither the ubiquity of eroticised cultural artefacts nor what Foucault called the unstoppable, institutionally-disseminated urge to talk about sex. Rather, in her reading,

¹¹⁵ Angela Phillips, 'Advice columnists', in Bob Franklin (Ed.), *Pulling Newspapers Apart: Analysing Print Journalism* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 102-112: 103.

¹¹⁶ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 57.

¹¹⁷ Marje Proops, *The Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1963, p. 13, cited in Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, p. 80.

¹¹⁸ Adrian Bingham (2012), 'Newspaper Problem Pages and British Sexual Culture Since 1918', 18 (1), *Media History*, pp. 51-63: 53 and 54; see also Cyril Bainbridge and Roy Stockdill, *The News of the World Story: 150 Years of the World's Bestselling Newspaper* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 133; Stafford Sommerfield, *Banner Headlines* (Shoreham-By-Sea: Scan Books, 1979), p. 106.

¹¹⁹ Angela Phillips, 'Advice Columnists', p. 103. There was a classed dimension to advice culture in the newspapers: according to *The Independent's* columnist Virginia Ironside, broadsheet readers were more interested in 'giving than in receiving advice', *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Dear Marje*, p. 7.

a genuine anxiety drove letter writers, people of all ages who had fallen between the very wide gaps between popular romance narratives, reticent parental birds-and-bees chats, scanty institutional sex education and scantier psychological guidance. ‘Many people with personal problems are afraid to face doctors, scared of anyone who might seem to be authoritarian. They fear the pointing moralising finger of blame. Or they are too inarticulate to express themselves’.¹²¹ To those who offered her a ‘nudge nudge’, Proops wished she could ‘invite them to read just one day’s distressing mail’.¹²²

The expert interest in romantic status was further accentuated by an emerging ‘science of relationships’ which – quite distinct from the much older field of sexology – saw a new raft of publications focussing on partner choice and the management of love. Many of these originated in the US but were published in Britain too; for example, *A New Look at Love: A Revealing Report on the Most Elusive Of All Emotions* (1978) by academic duo Elaine Hatfield and G Williams Walster, who themselves were the perfect embodiment of progressive sexual union (Hatfield is credited as a founding mother of ‘relationship science’).¹²³ ‘You may remember reading about Elaine Hatfield and William Walster in the newspapers or in *People* magazine,’ the introduction prompted (American) readers. ‘They are the beautiful, hard-working pair of professors who were photographed in bed’.¹²⁴ To George Harris, erstwhile editor of *Psychology Today*, and author of the introduction, ‘the underlying crisis of our time... has to do with those problems of trust and intimacy that we discover in passionate love, and in the aftermath, if we are lucky, that is – true companionship.’¹²⁵ The ensuing ‘revealing report’ broke love into categories of human development, from mate selection theories at the ethological end of the spectrum to the need for validation at the psychoanalytical end. While it offered tips for successful dating and relationships, the book fell into the post-Kinsey line of regarding humans as evolutionary, not cultural products – this, in step with the language of computer dating and eventually internet dating matchmakers, was a treatment of ‘the latest scientific findings’, as the back cover informed readers.

¹²¹*Dear Marje*, p. 8; The magazine *Self and Society*, launched in 1973, pitched itself against the serious under-provision of psychotherapeutic help for the two in five with mental problems, Thomson, *Psychological Subjects*, p. 103.

¹²²*Dear Marje*, p. 10.

¹²³Elaine Hatfield and William Walster, *A New Look at Love* (London: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

¹²⁴Hatfield and Walster, *A New Look*, p. vii.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, p. ix.

A particularly revealing example of this genre was *Man & Woman*, the Marshall Cavendish Encyclopaedia of ‘adult relationships’, first published in 1970 and consisting of 98 weekly instalments of a densely packed 30 pages. In 1972, a digest was published, called the *Encyclopaedia of Love and Sex*, which summarised key themes in terms of ‘The Physiology of Sex’, ‘The Art of Loving’ and ‘The Psychology of Love’.¹²⁶ None other than Dr Alex Comfort headed up the *Man & Woman* editorial board, along with an obstetrician from Charing Cross Hospital and the National Marriage Guidance Council, which lent its ‘help and support’: such a board firmly demonstrated an insistence on the intermeshed nature of physiological pragmatism, sexual technique and romantic feeling. Circulation figures for the ‘encyclopaedia’ are unavailable, so its analytic strength lies in the ambition and scope of the encyclopaedia itself. Billing itself as ‘a new kind of publication’, *Man & Woman* placed the accrual of sexuo-relational knowledge at its core in almost pedagogical terms. As with Comfort’s observation that his readers were those who wanted to know ‘all’ there was to know, *Man & Woman* encouraged readers to carefully collect each issue by placing a regular order: ‘when you have completed the series, you will find you have a magnificently bound, permanent reference work’ – detailed instructions followed (and were repeated severally) about how to bind the issues together.¹²⁷

Foreshadowing many of the reader debates in *Singles* seven years later, John Wilson, editor of *Man & Woman*, fixed on 1970 as a watershed moment for sexual and romantic heterosexual relations. ‘What we are witnessing... is not simply a change. It is also an enlargement, an expansion of the area of social and personal living about which questions may be asked.’¹²⁸ Articles that followed, such as ‘The playground of marriage’, which asserted that ‘for a man and a woman love-making can be a beautiful and satisfying experience’ only if ‘they....understand and care for each other’s needs’: a world of bliss could be had for those lucky enough to have a partner (and a self) with sufficient emotional dexterity.¹²⁹ But sexual heat was the ubiquitous visual code of *Man & Woman*: the marriage article, one among many, was paired with a picture of a man kissing a woman’s naked breast. The next article considered whether men can get away

¹²⁶*Encyclopaedia of Love & Sex: A Comprehensive Guide to the Physiology of Sex, the Art of Loving, and the Psychology of Love* (London: Marshall Cavendish, 1972).

¹²⁷*Man & Woman*, Part 1 (1970), cover.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, both p. 3.

with loving (and having) two women, before the lens zooms outward to consider the broad question, ‘How permissive is the permissive society?’ – accompanied with (another) picture of a slim, naked woman atop a man’s shoulders at a festival.¹³⁰ Subsequent issues continued this relentless formula of the reflective, the coaxing, the smoothly liberatory, the visually titillating, the empirical and the diagrammatic (genitalia is repetitively depicted in text book style).

But while promoting all the possibilities of ‘cordon bleu’ sex, the monogamous model still underpinned analysis, with lifelong single people seen as troubled outsiders; even possibly pathological. In ‘The men who won’t get married’, bachelors are diagnosed with ‘emotional alienation’ that ‘may stem subconsciously from childhood fears and inhibitions’ – their unsmiling photos, ranged mugshot-style down the side of the page, enhance the optics of marginality.¹³¹ Sex was always best enjoyed in marriage, and marriage best enjoyed in sex: it not only ‘provides a good basis for marriage as a whole’ but it is ‘the fullest expression of two people’s love for each other’.¹³²

Moreover, a growing emphasis on partner ‘compatibility’ stemming from psychological research and presented as the science of experts fed hopes of finding ‘the one’, and added importance to the notion of correct selection both sexually and emotionally. The idea that some people were right and some irrevocably wrong for one further turned up the heat on singles, who not only had to contend with the fear of emotional and physical withering without sexual love, but of making the wrong choice should they meet someone of reciprocal interest. In an article called ‘Sexual incompatibilities’, the *Encyclopaedia of Love and Sex* warned that ‘sexual incompatibilities can irrevocably undermine and disrupt a marriage’, and could stem from such helpless factors as ‘social conditioning’.¹³³ Such assertions coincided with the extension of both personality and compatibility testing among psychology researchers; by 1964, a large swathe of books published on family research focussed on questions of mate choice and in 1970, the American researchers Bernard Murstein and Zick Rubin wrote their ‘taxonomy of love’

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 9.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 28.

¹³²Ibid., p. 217.

¹³³Ibid., p. 216.

and ‘The measurement of romantic love’, respectively.¹³⁴ These took an ongoing, American-led interest in attraction and dating behaviours into a realm of more depth, seeking a range of more primal factors in determining emotional and sexual response.

The interest in compatibility in mate choice and its central role in creating long-term romantic harmony extended beyond the social sciences. Astrologers were particularly interested in this line of research in conjunction with the softer-edged type of psychological ‘humanism’ discussed above. Straddling the resurgent school of ‘parapsychology’ – with its emphatic emphasis on telepathy and out of body experiences – along with New Age wisdom and the more pragmatic strand of behaviourism emerging from institutionalised psychology, astrologists defended their craft as a ‘basis for understanding’ how a potential partner ticked.¹³⁵ Decoding their ‘program[ming]’ could ‘show what each individual is looking for in a relationship and in a partner and what each one needs’. Notably, the email address of Sandy Nye, the widow and former business partner of the founder and director of Britain’s long-running computer dating firm Dateline, contains the word ‘starchild’, while Brian Snellgrove, founder of The London Village dating and social club in the 1970s, was an entrepreneur and ‘psychic’ and to this day coaches therapists in Kirlian energy photography.¹³⁶ In the 1970s, women’s magazines such as *She* began promoting computerised horoscope services; by 2000, between 25 and 70 per cent of the adult population read one (the width of this range testifies to the unreliability of the measurement).¹³⁷ And if the idea of partner compatibility captured a wide range of imaginations, the belief in the romantic applicability of star signs was also widespread beyond committed spiritualists, forming part of a wider 1970s interest in psychic powers extending beyond the fringe

¹³⁴Bernard Murstein (1977), ‘A Taxonomy Of Love’, unpublished manuscript (Connecticut College, 1977). The idea was developed further in the 1980s: e.g. Robert Stern and Michael Barnes (eds), *The Psychology of Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 13-37; Zick Rubin (1970), ‘Measurement of Romantic Love’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 16 (2), pp. 265-273. For the sharp growth of personality testing in contemporary society, see Annie Murphy Paul, *The Cult of Personality: How Personality Tests Are Leading Us to Miseducate Our Children, Mismanage Our Companies, and Misunderstand Ourselves* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

¹³⁵Discussion of parapsychology in Francis Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p. 187. Penny Thornton, *Romancing the Stars: Astrology of Love and Romance* (London: Aquarian Press, 1988), p. 10. For a comprehensive discussion and historiographical overview of the New Age movement in the 1970s and 1980s, see Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (London: Wiley, 1996).

¹³⁶Email address used in arrangement of author’s interview with Nye. For Snellgrove, London Village: ‘About Brian Snellgrove’. ezinearticles.com/expert/Brian_Snellgrove/1427473.

¹³⁷Nicholas Campion, ‘Horoscopes and Popular Culture’, *Pulling Newspapers Apart*, pp. 253-263: 255.

into the readership of, for example, *The Times* newspaper.¹³⁸ Astrological dating agencies were advertised, alongside articles exploring the validity of star signs.¹³⁹ *Singles* magazine made much of star signs too: one reader wrote a letter encouraging the magazine to stipulate that personal advertisers state their sign: ‘a very reliable method of finding a compatible partner’.¹⁴⁰

Across a variety of discourses, single people felt the pressure to pair, often expressing frustration and alienation in terms of ‘discrimination’ in a society dominated by ‘the couples’ philosophy’.¹⁴¹ This was a society still wed to traditional notions of coupling up rather than a more liberal or simply more just world in which singles were treated with ‘equal’ rights and respect. One reader, writing into *Singles* magazine suggesting a range of measures the magazine might adopt to remedy the punitive social position of singles, advocated countering ‘couples philosophy’, pleading for ‘articles on singles [in] other countries so that singles in Britain recognise the normality of their existence.’¹⁴² The problem, however, was wider than the persistence of a ‘norm’ structured around the romantic ideal of long-term partnerships and marriage. Not only was the couple still a normative fixture, but sex – in being extricated from marriage – had become instrumentalised through agony aunts and authors like Comfort as a conduit for a fulfilling type of pleasure. If it was cultivated, that pleasure could be integral to personal development. Singles were often reminded that they were not only missing out on love, but on the promise and pleasure of sex too. For some, the struggle to carve out a fulfilling identity under these circumstances was deeply vexed, made worse by the very real problems of isolation and loneliness.

The problem of loneliness

Commercial matchmaking, singleness and urban alienation have been linked since the 19th century. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, London had long been known as

¹³⁸British credulousness in the face of seeming psychic powers has attracted lightly mocking social analysis such as that by Francis Wheen in *Strange Days Indeed*, and earlier, Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down To Earth And Other Essays on the Irrational In Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹³⁹‘Use your stars to have a good affair’, *Cosmopolitan*, Nov 1972, p. 70.

¹⁴⁰*Singles*, 22 (March 1979), p. 9.

¹⁴¹‘Discrimination’, in ‘Survival for singles in the Married Jungle’, *Singles*, 10 (March 1978), p. 10; ‘couples philosophy’ in reader letter, *Singles*, 12 (May 1978), p. 5.

¹⁴²*Singles*, 12 (May 1978), p. 5.

a lonely place; what WT Stead called ‘the city of dreadful solitude’. In 1890, General Booth, advocate of marriage bureaux, decried the impossibility of provincial courtship rituals in London, where ‘many hundreds, nay thousands, of young men and young women, who are living in lodgings are practically without any opportunity of making the acquaintance of each other, or of any one of the other sex!’¹⁴³ But in the late 20th century loneliness, a ‘disease’ seen to face singles above all, extended far beyond the capital, sometimes even reaching a national platform. In the Crosby by-election of 1981, from an eclectic party mix, Donald Potter – the founder of a Young Conservatives lonely hearts group called Close Encounters – wanted to install a phone line for lonely people for The Humanitarian Party. This was clearly facetious, but it was another example of the way in which loneliness had taken its place in the roll-call of symptoms of modern malaise.¹⁴⁴

This section first sets modern loneliness in historical perspective, before identifying several strands and patterns in discussions of loneliness in the 1970s and 1980s. These include its pathologisation, relationship to romantic singleness, and the promotion of solutions to it. This section therefore aims to put in place another key feature of the emotional environment shaping the approaches and attitudes of daters towards their future and themselves, and in which the post-1960s British matchmaking industry flourished. It is important to note that the extent and experience of loneliness is closely connected to social factors, particularly age, socioeconomic class and institutional provision. It is not my intention here to delve into the rich historical and social science tradition analysing these intersections, nor the changing extended family structures that resulted in the increasing isolation of many people in the period.¹⁴⁵ This is because the majority of my subjects in this study, and the targets of the growing dating industry, fell within the ages of 20-70 and were generally within an actively aspirational framework of personal and economic striving. While income, family relationships, social network, age and particularly marital history are all clearly factors in their experience of singleness (as the Mintel report also made clear) my concern here is the quest for

¹⁴³William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London International Headquarters of the Salvation Army, 1890) p. 233.

¹⁴⁴‘Caught in the Foot-Benn crossfire’, *The Times*, 13 Nov 1981, p. 2.

¹⁴⁵Studies of mid-century loneliness in relation to the elderly have been particularly fruitful: overview in Charlotte Greenhalgh, ‘Love in Later Life: Old Age, Marriage and Social Research in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain’, in Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds.), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1919-1970* (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 144-161.

romance, and the ways in which perceptions of loneliness shaped that quest. The full range of the experience of social isolation in Britain is beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, third-party dating, though profoundly shaped by social pressures, was nonetheless mediated through cultural forums: matchmaking services were offered through (or advertised in) print; popular psychology surrounding relationships was conveyed in books and magazines and on TV; depictions of romantic felicity or celebration of the independent state was everywhere in films and novels. This section, then, tracks some of the circulation of ideas surrounding the single state. In doing it sketches aspects of the cultural more than the social context of loneliness, first as problem, then transmogrified into opportunity.

Whereas loneliness is often figured as a universal, atemporal component of the human condition, alienation – marked by the tenor of the relationship between individuals and social structures – is a sociological term usually linked to a notion of ‘modernity’.¹⁴⁶ The two clearly intersect, but unlike loneliness, alienation in Western societies has been an explicit, wide-running motif in 20th century art and sociology, and its thematic territory is useful in considering the context of a predominantly metropolitan singles industry. The proliferation of urban dating services served growing numbers of people without the community or other social or personal bonds to meet a partner. As *Lonely Hearts*, the 1977 documentary (Thames), some of the most lonely were also signed up to numerous services; one young man it featured belonged to three dating agencies as well as placing personals in the *London Weekly Advertiser* and *Time Out*. Such admissions were valuable, and – as my own research experience showed – not readily available, due to a heavy layer of reticence surrounding romantic loneliness, perceived as a deep-seated vulnerability. One *Lonely Hearts* subject insisted nobody (until then) knew about her ad in *Time Out*: ‘it’s all very hush hush; people think there’s something wrong with you, and perhaps there is.’ The influx of young adults into the metropolis in the 1970s who had left behind home comforts and community relationships, of which this young woman was one, suffered perhaps as greatly as the elderly and abandoned. Catering to them were several new services whose focus was not simply on courtship but also simply providing human contact to people who in some cases were near

¹⁴⁶The 1970s saw a number of spiritualist appraisals of the loneliness ‘epidemic’ in the Anglosphere: see, for instance, Ronald Rolheiser, *The Loneliness Factor: Its Religious and Spiritual Meaning* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1979), who mused that: ‘To be human is to be lonely’, p. 9; Ira Tanner, *Loneliness: The Fear of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

suicidal with loneliness; these included Nexus and The London Village, with 2,500 members in 1977, aimed at ‘anchoring’ people by ‘breaking down’ the metropolis into a series of local events.¹⁴⁷

Frank Furedi argues forcefully in *Therapy Culture* that ‘the most significant feature of therapeutic culture is not so much the promotion but the distancing of the self from others’, a process of fragmenting informal dependencies that ‘both reflects and promotes the trend towards...alienation’.¹⁴⁸ Durkheim’s concept of ‘anomie’ described what happened when norms were violently disrupted by rapid social or economic change. Bereft of the limits and rules required for psychological integration, a catastrophic disjunct between internal desires and external structures opened up, leaving people floating dangerously outside a meaningful framework. According to Durkheim, the fatal effects of living a life untethered by embedded historical structures hit the romantically separated particularly hard, since the institution of marriage provided an essential horizon in which the potentially endless itch of (male) desire could be contained. Bachelors, experiencing unbounded freedom, would be more likely to succumb to severe depression.¹⁴⁹ Georg Simmel, also working at the turn of the 20th century, pioneered the concept of alienation as a by-product of ‘modern’ urban life, a seam that has continued to be richly ploughed by sociologists.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, psychologists interested in the impact of individualisation of relational life have also attended to the effects of emotional alienation within families.

The sociology of alienation in cities had reached saturation for some by the 1970s: in his classic *Soft City*, Michael Raban’s opening description of a pleasant feeling of dislocation is accompanied by the weary thought that: ‘A sociologist, I suppose, would see [being ‘adrift’ and disoriented] as classic symptoms of alienation, more evidence to add to the already fat dossier on the evils of urban life’.¹⁵¹ All the same, the imaginative terrain of Raban’s London revolves around estrangement, down the deepest psychic level: ‘If a city can estrange you from yourself, how much more powerfully can it

¹⁴⁷For interview with Nexus and London Village founder, and footage of both offices and operations, see *Lonely Hearts* (Thames, 1977).

¹⁴⁸Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, p. 21; a major fictionalised account of urban alienation and loneliness published at the end of our period is Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised* (London: Vintage, 2001).

¹⁴⁹Emile Durkheim, *On Suicide* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996 [1897]).

¹⁵⁰Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy Of Money* (London: Routledge, 2004 [1900]).

¹⁵¹Raban, *Soft City* (London: Fontana, 1975), p. 9.

detach you from the lives of other people, and how deeply immersed you may become in the inaccessibly private community in your own head'.¹⁵² For Raban, the proliferation of dating services was a central image of the isolating experience of 1970s urban life. He noted that 'coming out of the fog, making oneself visible and available, is prickly and difficult' but that

one can, if one is sufficiently bold or desperate, advertise one's loneliness in the newspaper...in the Personal Column, you can reach into fog by proxy, then see who comes to you through the mailbox: Here loneliness has a solidarity, even a kind of respectability; fellow isolates are stacked neatly in columns of fine type.....¹⁵³

Raban was damning about the practice, however, viewing personals as meaningless 'overworked' missives delivered 'in the language of bruisedness, of feeling too exposed'. Advertising for a partner, then, was 'one of the darker freedoms of the city [in which] the individual [is] at liberty to barely exist...[the personals] bear witness to the stunted conception of character which the city permits as its worst'.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, in Raban's brand of urban lyricism, those singles who advertise have been 'consumed' by the 'latent discontinuity, emptiness and helpless solipsism' that is always threatened in the city. Considering that in 'the last two or three years the computer-dating industry has mushroomed spectacularly', he noted the way it 'boldly exploits the shame of loneliness, and answers to the peculiarly big-city condition of sexual isolation'.¹⁵⁵ The city and the computer had much in common, since both were 'mysterious and impersonal'.¹⁵⁶ The imagery of lonely singles suffering urban alienation, set against the whirring of impersonal machinery, shaped popular depictions too: the documentary *Lonely Hearts* repeatedly panned across desolate nocturnal scenes of London, from lonely traffic lights changing from red to green on isolated roads, to a chaotic constellation of bright lights illuminating an otherwise incomprehensible black terrain. Unlike the makers of *Lonely Hearts*, however, Raban was content to limit his observations to Dateline slogans and thumbnail sketches of harried lonely commuters. Yearning singletons have long lent themselves to pastiche, and the work of this thesis in excavating the experience of daters beyond such pastiche remains clear.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 139.

The problem of loneliness was not, of course, new in the 1970s, but its outlines had changed along with lengthening life spans, norms around autonomy, privacy, and communal living, and changes in access to the housing stock, for instance with the end of rent control (Rent Act of 1957). Amy Froide has shone a light on early modern single women, ‘imagined as isolated and lonely individuals, bereft...’ in contemporary perceptions.¹⁵⁷ She shows, however, that the prevalence of widowhood helped normalise the never-married, estimated at up to 27 per cent of the population in the 17th century, and that a close network of same-sex relationships characterised their lives in ways that would disappear in the centuries following.¹⁵⁸ Katherine Holden has drawn attention to the high numbers of unmarried men and women in Britain in the 40 years leading up to 1931: only one-half of adults over 15 were married at any one time, while over a third never married.¹⁵⁹ But in the post-war years higher marriage rates added stigma to those who remained solo – in 1961, only one in five women had never been married.¹⁶⁰ Holden has explored the ways in which single women in particular suffered from isolation in the post-war years, caught between poor pay, high rents and the stigma created by record high marriage rates. The spreading popularity of the playboy image left men ‘less isolated’, while bachelors were more likely than spinsters to be taken in by families because of their perceived need for domestic services.¹⁶¹ Even so, as the sociologist Peter Townsend found in his study of old age in Bethnal Green, ‘these kinds of relationships had their boundaries’ – one such ‘surrogate son’ felt that his ‘age and single status made him reluctant to get too close to them’.¹⁶² Studies of mid-century loneliness centred on the elderly: Townsend found that the ten most isolated people of a survey of 203 over-sixties were single or childless.¹⁶³ In 1961, the unmarried were also found to be over-represented in NHS hospitals, homes for the elderly and psychiatric hospitals.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁷ Amy Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 45.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ Holden, *Shadow of Marriage*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁶² Peter Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), cited in Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 45.

¹⁶³ Peter Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People*, p. 192.

¹⁶⁴ 1961 census, Summary Tables, table 24, ‘Institutions: Age and Marital Condition of inmates’, cited in Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 47.

Yet in some ways, the picture for unmarried people was less lonely than it would become in the following decades. American observers were particularly convinced that contemporary life had birthed an acute form of widespread loneliness: ‘Life...has exploded, and loneliness is one main ingredient in the fallout’, wrote the social researcher Suzanne Gordon in 1976.¹⁶⁵ Concern about the social disconnectedness of life caused by the disintegration of American community resurfaced in Robert Putnam’s global best-seller *Bowling Alone* in 2000.¹⁶⁶ In Britain, many, particularly single and childless older women, lived in boarding houses or hotels; of 20,000 people living in such places in 1952, there was more than twice as many women.¹⁶⁷ By the late 1970s, large boarding houses, with their modicum of daily human contact, had faded away, while the 1980s saw the construction of more self-contained social housing, including tower blocks and suburban single occupancy retirement units with porters rather than co-lodgers and landladies. Private as well as public house-building firms responded to forecasts about the rise of single person households, offering ‘starter homes’ and ‘studio flats’ for the younger that accompanied an increase in the number of one-bedroom homes being built: Barratt Homes launched The Mayfair house for the growing number of single householders, in 1977.¹⁶⁸ *Singles* magazine reported in 1980 on a ‘one room living’ stand at the Design Centre Exhibition at Haymarket. ‘Two room constructions in particular will be of interest to readers – the bachelor pad (no cooking area here) and the student’s bedsit’.¹⁶⁹ However, while ‘bedsitter land’ had become a reality for many renting converted and carved up flats in London, the fresh construction of single-person residences was contained, growing only 3.5 per cent in both public and private sector housing completions between 1987 and 1990 (see table).¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, single people were a significant force in the transitory rental market; those aged 16-59 made up 41 per

¹⁶⁵Suzanne Gordon, *Lonely in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976). For an overview of the explosion in sociological research on loneliness, see Amy Rokach (2004), ‘Loneliness Then and Now: Reflection on Social and Emotional Alienation in Everyday Life’, *Current Psychology*, 23 (1), pp. 24–40.

¹⁶⁶Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

¹⁶⁷1951 Census, General Report, p. 87 and table 35, cited in Holden, *Shadow of Marriage*, p. 47.

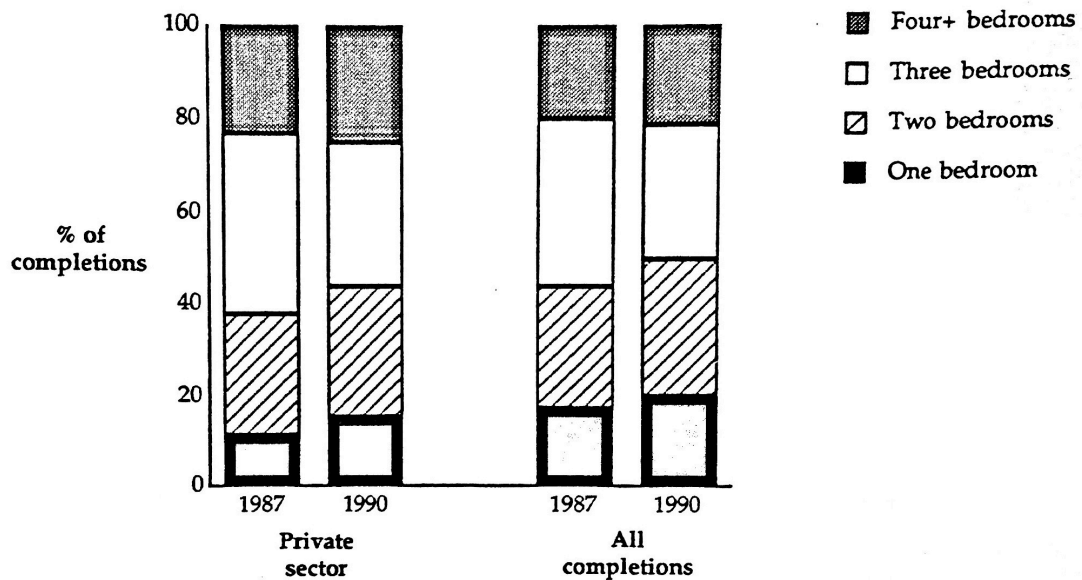
¹⁶⁸‘Building a legend’ (c. 2012), marketing pamphlet, p. 10 (in Zoe Strimpel’s possession through private correspondence).

¹⁶⁹*Singles*, 41 (Oct 1980), p. 7.

¹⁷⁰Mintel, *Single Person Households*, pp. 2, 41 and 42. New schemes for co-sharing houses for the elderly have since appeared, see, e.g. ‘Cohousing: “It makes sense for people with things in common to live together”’, *The Guardian*, 16 Feb 2016, accessed online.

cent of all privately rented furnished homes, according to Mintel and the General Household Survey.¹⁷¹

Figure 40a Property size for private sector and total housing completions, England, 1987 and 1990



Source: Housing & Construction Statistics/Mintel

*Figure 3: Property size for private sector and total housing completion, England, 1987 and 1990, Mintel.*¹⁷²

Certainly, amidst the steady increase in private, self-supported living, often with financial worries (shaped but not caused, necessarily, by recession), many Britons the late 1970s and 1980s articulated strong feelings of isolation, loneliness and repression. The dating documentaries *Lonely Hearts* and *The Love Tapes* (New Decade Films, 1979) zoomed in on struggling singles in the big city. Both focussed, though not exclusively, on young people who had left provincial England, or youths spent in commonwealth countries, for London. One 28 year old divorcee interviewed in *Lonely Hearts* found her Asian newsagent the only source of comfort in her bedsit existence, noting: ‘people gaily assume that you’ll meet people [in London] and...but I really don’t see how’ while a young man who had grown up in ‘Malaya’ spoke of the

¹⁷¹Mintel, *Single Person Households*, p. 43.

¹⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 42.

withering loneliness of retreating in the ‘evenings into our own little boxes’. An Irish driving instructor in his 20s, who ate dinner daily at a local diner before going home to watch *Match of the Day*, told the camera: ‘they say loneliness is a foretaste of death; if that’s the case, I’ve had a feast’. In *The Love Tapes*, a subtle infomercial for Dateline, the main character was Barbara, who lived all alone in a flat in South Kensington, and was bowed down by the dreariness of nightly dinners for one. And single parents’ loneliness was exacerbated by financial anxieties. Of an estimated 700,000 lone parents in Britain by 1976 (83 per cent of whom were women), nearly half were on living on supplementary benefit.¹⁷³

Singles also took advantage of agony aunts and the ‘problems’ pages in the expanding magazine offering, leading to several aunts – including Irma Kurtz and Marje Proops – devoting whole books, or sections therein, to the problem. The issue was broached in a number of ways by the experts, from the alarmist to the pro-active. Irma Kurtz universalised and de-historicised loneliness, seeing it as a subjective feature of the human condition, but she also saw it as serving ‘contemporary unhappiness and neurosis’, noting that

there are characteristics of our society which exacerbate loneliness, and because we cannot hold loneliness or see it but only feel it, loneliness has become the carthorse of our misery, dragging behind it weights as disparate as stymied lust and the despair of genius.¹⁷⁴

Kurtz saw that sex was once more at the centre of many people’s perception of loneliness, but wished to re-categorise ‘sexual frustration’ as ‘irritation or misery’ instead.¹⁷⁵

Deborah Cohen’s narrative of the 19th century reverence for family privacy morphing into a widespread fear of secrecy in the post-psychoanalytic 20th century serves as a useful reminder of the historically particular experience of marginality.¹⁷⁶ Spinsters and bachelors – themselves diverse groups – may have become less open to institutional and social policing as the 20th century wore on, but Cohen’s analysis reminds us that their

¹⁷³‘Single Minded’, *The Guardian*, 28 Sep 1976, p. 11.

¹⁷⁴Irma Kurtz, *Loneliness* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 4.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

social and emotional baggage became tethered in new, stressful ways to the axis of normal/good vs abnormal/ shameful/secret. Even the consciousness raising movements of the 1970s' sexual liberation front contributed to the pressure on people to open up all inner doors in front of others.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Irma Kurtz perceptively saw the coding of abnormal/shameful in the seemingly progressive sex literature of the 1960s and 1970s, taking issue with the treatment of masturbation in David Reuben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (1969), in which the reader was told 'masturbation is fun...certainly, not as much fun as fully-fledged sexual intercourse, but the next thing to it'. Kurtz noted: 'In other words, masturbation is a private confession that no partner has volunteered or been seduced into the better game. Masturbation is the 'next thing' to fully-fledged sex and therefore only a notch above nothing at all...Is it not shameful to exist alone in a sexual desert while everybody else is splashing around naked in the swim?'¹⁷⁸ Margaret Adams, author of the classic study, *Single Blessedness* (1976) also pinpointed the way shame attached to fear of being socially abnormal when single.¹⁷⁹ The pervasiveness of the idea that 'sociability' is what 'what constitutes normal and proper behaviour', with 'solitude' its opposite, meant single people were frequently made to feel worse about being alone than they should. 'Modern society,' claimed Adams, presaging Kurtz, 'gives a very low rating to solitude'.¹⁸⁰ Overlapping with Cohen's later analysis, Adams blamed the destruction of privacy for the denigration of the solitary, pinpointing new mass entertainment and media, 'mega-assemblies' such as Woodstock, as pushing a 'social ideal of corporate mass involvement'. Those who eschew collective social life, Adams' study found, 'the fear of being categorized as odd and out of step'.¹⁸¹

Coverage of loneliness in *Singles*, Britain's only magazine for single people, helps sketch the dimensions of the issue as it was perceived in the late 1970s, since the problems of – as well as solutions to – being romantically alone were the magazine's focal point. The first five issues of *Singles* magazine saw a multi-part, in-depth feature on British loneliness as studied by the magazine's consultant psychologist Tony Lake in 1977. In it, Lake identified singles most affected by loneliness, concluding they were in

¹⁷⁷Ibid., p. 247.

¹⁷⁸Kurtz, *Loneliness*, p. 44.

¹⁷⁹Adams, *Single Blessedness: Observations on the Single State in Married Society* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

¹⁸⁰Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁸¹Ibid.

their 30s and 40s, not their 50s and 60s, and that 60 per cent lived alone, 17 per cent with their parents and 16 per cent with their children. Marriage had reached an all-time high in 1972, but the contemporaneous rearrangement of relational norms would soon mean that more types of people were living alone: the divorced as well as never-married women and men. Fewer people lived in lodgings with their landladies and landlords providing communal dining arrangements, and more sought privacy in bedsits.¹⁸² Singleness in Britain was being refigured in multiple new ways in this period, from a state ripe with consumerist promise to one of sexual emancipation. It was also seen as a problem resulting in a particularly grave symptom: loneliness, often viewed as an illness which might be cured by use of dating agencies and other heterosocial activities. Singles themselves often described harrowing states of emotional and social solitude. One reader wrote in suggesting a phone-in service for singles, during ‘lonely peoples’ time of lowest ebb [when] you’re back from the office and everyone has closed their doors and gone into the snug, the kids are in bed or out, you’ve broached a bottle of wine, mooned around the house, cried all over the carpet...’.¹⁸³ One of the magazine’s favoured first-person accounts of the single life was billed as that ‘of a middle aged divorcee who is desperately lonely’, while the lonely hearts ads printed at the back frequently contained the self-description ‘lonely’, as did those of *Time Out*. *Singles* contributors were aware of being on the sharp end of contemporary freedoms, noting that ‘Life is more informal these days [than in the 19th century], and there’s no doubt we have much more freedom. Trouble is, we are free to be lonely, free to make mistakes.’¹⁸⁴

As suggested by the women’s magazine coverage discussed earlier, the idea that single people were necessarily to be pitied, for loneliness and for sexual frustration, was regularly contested, but the idea that they suffered, mainly from unnatural isolation, was persistent from within and without the singles community. Bourdieu’s idea of pleasure as a duty for citizens of modern consumer society is suggestive here for ways of recreating the position of singles in the 1970s and afterwards. With ‘fun’ – often experienced through skilful or otherwise boastable sex – a ‘duty’, those outside the mating matrix could suffer the injurious fate of ‘individuality and self-hood’ becoming

¹⁸²Katherine Whitehorn, *Cooking In A Bedsitter* (London: Penguin, 1974); Tracey Thorn, *Bedsit Disco Queen: How I Grew Up and Tried to Be a Pop Star* (London: Virago, 2003).

¹⁸³*Singles*, 59 (April 1982), p. 5.

¹⁸⁴*Singles*, 37 (June 1980), p. 19.

mis-shapen.¹⁸⁵ *Singles* often expressed the uncomfortable double sense of being part of a society that for the first time encouraged its inhabitants to explore their sexuality, but which – when those people were unable to or choosing not to do so – infused them with a sense of failure. This aspect rose to the surface frequently in *Singles*. Although it was dedicated to offering ways of relieving loneliness and – if possible – enjoying the single state, the magazine nonetheless emphasised the extremities of isolation. The conception of loneliness was one peculiar to contemporary life, or ‘modern’ life, and was heavily pathologised. ‘Whoever we are, whatever we do, we all have our occupational hazards...If you are single, then there can be little doubt that your occupational hazard is loneliness.’ As the introduction to the series of five articles based on *Singles*’ in-house psychologist (the first of many) put it: ‘Loneliness, in its extreme form is a killer. The feeling that nobody cares whether you live or die, whether you scream or stay silent...can [drain from your body] every last drop of the will to live’. Sufferers abstain from suicide only by ‘the total lack of feeling’ wrought by the condition. ‘They slump into apathy, sometimes so severe as to resemble a schizophrenic state of withdrawal and detachment’.¹⁸⁶

Singles employed an eclectic mixture of experts and amateurs, including the psychiatrist Colin Brewer, struck off in 2006 for assisting suicide, of which Lake was one of those respected beyond the magazine.¹⁸⁷ His professional interests fit firmly within the matrix of psychologically and emotionally-oriented studies of human happiness and potential discussed above. His specialism was ‘communication, love and acquaintance’, and he would develop his psychological career around loneliness and its corollaries, including depression. Following his short employment at *Singles*, he went on to write books including (with Ann Hills) *Affairs: The Anatomy of Extra-Marital Relationships* (1979), *Loneliness* (1980), *How To Cope With Your Nerves* (1983), *Relationships* (1981), *Defeating Depression* (1987) and *Living With Grief* (1984). Thus Lake’s concern for the singles’ affliction was earnest and in-depth, with a methodology more plausible than many used in *Singles* articles, although his commercially expedient links to Dateline framed the study. ‘Much to [Dateline’s] credit, they were also interested in the other

¹⁸⁵Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 367.

¹⁸⁶*Singles*, 1 (May 1977), p. 15.

¹⁸⁷‘Tony Lake’, obituary, *The Independent*, 17 April 1993, p. 15.

side of the coin' – not simply in 'their business' of 'friendship, happiness'.¹⁸⁸ Lake conducted a pilot with '30 single people' from a Dateline 'Breakaway' holiday, 28 per cent of whom said they were 'very lonely people'.¹⁸⁹ Those who had never been married were more lonely than those who had been, but the majority rejected the notion that loneliness crept up like a disease, instead blaming themselves for the tendency 'to expect too much from the people they meet'.¹⁹⁰ But Lake acknowledged that the sample of 30 was too small, and that drawing from Dateline customers would produce bias, so he next designed a questionnaire suitable for larger groups. He advertised in the *Evening Standard*, the *Sunday Times* and on LBC radio: ultimately 1500 people returned the questionnaires. Lake's final sample was spread evenly throughout the British Isles and covered the age range between 16 and 76, and although they came from 'all social classes' they were 'predominantly white, and white-collar'. More than a third had experienced 'real loneliness' in the month before filling in the questionnaire. Although 50 per cent said they did not consider themselves lonely people, Lake was concerned, advising that 'Pain and misery on this scale must not be ignored', and that 'the reality of loneliness is that an estimated one and a half million single people in Britain are desperately lonely at this very moment'.¹⁹¹ Although Lake was interested in personality types, loneliness was not overly individually pathologised in his report; instead, it was seen as a social ill, 'accepted as normal' just as was 'scurvy once, and pelegra, rickets and diabetes – all diseases which result from deficiencies which modern medicine can understand. Health should not be a lottery in this way. Loneliness is the sort of progressive disease we would all be better without.'¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ *Singles*, 1 (May 1977), p. 15.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16, and *ibid.*, 2 (June 1977), p. 9.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 4 (Sep, 1977), p. 23.

Diagrams accompanying Tony Lake's loneliness study

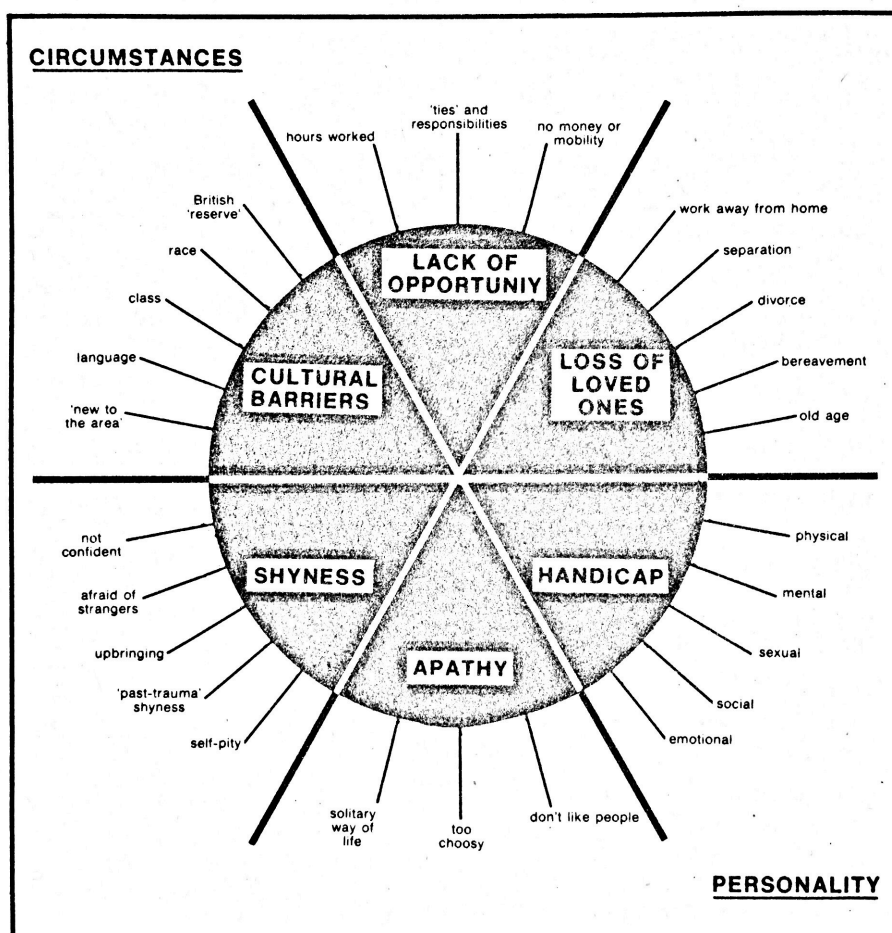


Figure 4: Causes of loneliness chart, Singles, 3 (August 1977), p. 34.

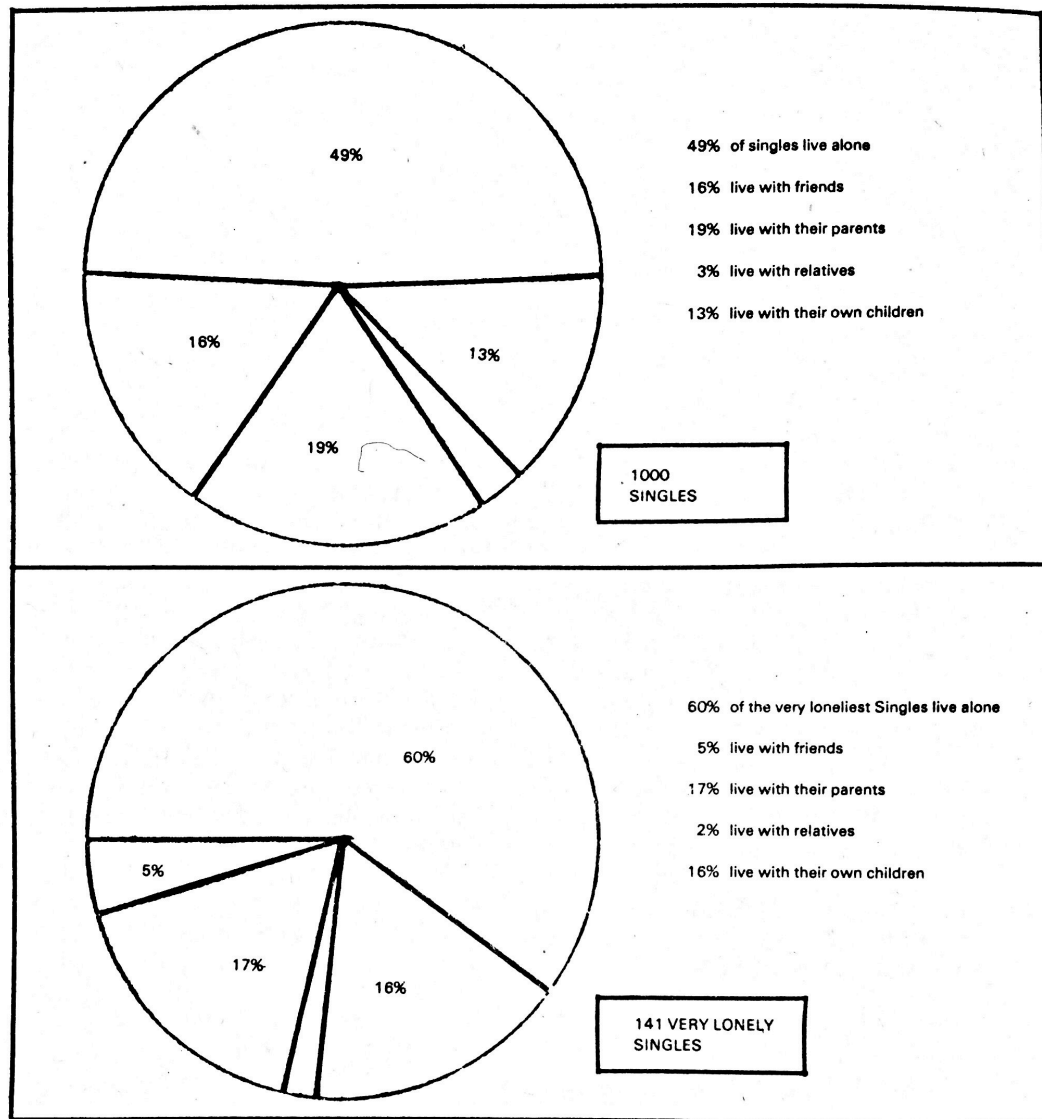


Figure 5: 'How singles live': 1,000 singles and 141 'very lonely singles', *Singles*, 2 (June 1977), p. 10.

If Lake's concern stemmed from a clinical tradition favouring facts over judgements, the main node of his research on loneliness concerned social skills, not mental health. Focussing on a more mainstream application of the skills practised in personal growth and encounter groups, Lake firmly located loneliness within a nation lacking 'social skills'. Inspired by the British social psychologist Michael Argyle's 1972 modifications to 'communication cycle' theory, which analysed the patterns of successful one-to-one conversations, Lake identified much of the problem in terms of 'communication disabilities'. Particular attention was paid to body language and facial expression, which was read to exemplify the severing of self from other, rooted in painful personal history.

Case study ‘Bernard’, for instance, who was trying to meet a wife through computer dating, lonely hearts and dating agencies, could immediately be identified as shy, damaged and unhappy in his own skin. ‘One only has to look at Bernard to see the disturbed nature of his body movements during communication to realise how deeply damaged he has been by [past] experiences. He takes no pride in his face’. Bernard’s body could be read even more closely:

Only the mouth moves when he talks. The muscles at the side of his mouth are still and short of exercise. By the side of his eyes are equally unused muscles...He tends to avoid eye contact, and keeps his head still while he talks. He does not gesture ...His tone of voice is monotonous.¹⁹³

However, ‘in no other way than by watching his eyes, is it possible to tell that Bernard has ever been loved...he wants to be married, but seems to be an entirely sexless person.’¹⁹⁴ Lake was clear that social isolation was bad, but romantic isolation could be even worse: ‘the deprivation of intimacy has long-term and short-term consequences. In the chronic cases sexuality can become so badly damaged by ill-use or lack of use that it is permanently destroyed, and the person has no will left to live socially’.¹⁹⁵

The role for dating agencies in all this was clear: 20 per cent of the sample had used computer dating (presumably including Dateline’s competitors – there is also the possibility that this number was massaged to please the *Singles* editor, Dateline’s director John Patterson), 16 per cent lonely hearts ads and per cent dating agencies, still referred to as ‘marriage bureaux’.¹⁹⁶

While *Singles* magazine had a clear vested interest in deploying resources on the horrors of loneliness, its spectre seemed to be haunting Britain beyond the magazine’s pages. Marje Proops devoted a chapter in her spare *Dear Marje* to ‘the anguish of loneliness’, which she found afflicted people of all ages, but particularly the old and the shy. Proops diagnosed the problem in two ways specific to the period, both demographic and epidemiological. These were women’s longer lives and ‘soaring’ divorce. Testifying to

¹⁹³*Singles*, 4 (Sep 1977), p. 22.

¹⁹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁹⁶The shift in terminology from ‘marriage bureaux’ to ‘introduction agency’ in the 1980s reflects a telling change in emphasis, again in step with a move from a traditional concern with marriage towards a more open-ended conception of dating as lifestyle. The shift will be explored further in the next chapter.

the topicality of rising numbers of divorced women and single mothers, she noted the proliferation of singles clubs, which sorely lacked male members.¹⁹⁷

But in other sectors, singleness was being recast as an opportunity to be briskly managed by individuals and maximised by marketers – succumbing to loneliness could and should be avoided. Thus the increasing emphasis on ‘lifestyle’ marketing, directed towards a more affluent population of young and middle aged professionals provided a dissonant counterpoint to Lake’s brand of honest, even shocking appraisal of real single experience – a proliferation of (sporadically) celebratory depictions of single life in marketing and publishing suggested a world of luxurious steaks for one and sunny group holidays. The can-do attitude towards personal happiness – with or without a partner – also came through explicitly in *Singles*, too. In addition to the ‘successful single’ column promoting a pro-active and entrepreneurial model for singleness, *Singles* more directly addressed the lonely. In September 1977, *Singles*’ editor John Patterson wrote a telling comment in relation to the ongoing study of loneliness in the magazine.

To pity the lonely is to patronise them...To argue that loneliness is not the fault of the lonely is equally unhelpful because it suggests that the individual can do nothing about it...Our policy for the problem of loneliness should be tough and practical. We should increase self-sufficiency of the lonely and help them to help themselves.¹⁹⁸

Solutions: romantic self management

The 1980s and 1990s were boom decades for magazines, and market research commissioned to shape magazine content repeatedly looked to the young, single and middle class as an influential market, leading to the launch of magazines such as *Esquire* (1991), *Frank* (1997-2000), *Minx* (1996-2000).¹⁹⁹ If marketers were paying increasing attention to the growing single population, then marketing language grew more prevalent in the ways in which singles were addressed in other spheres. The attractions and prospects of date-hunters were increasingly packaged in a brusque

¹⁹⁷Proops, *Dear Marje*, p. 97.

¹⁹⁸*Singles*, 4 (Sept 1977), p. 34.

¹⁹⁹Gough, *Understanding Women’s Magazines*, pp. 136-141.

vocabulary borrowed from the commercial world of management and sales, also integrating threads from feminist discourse.

Both men and women across the broad middle of the class spectrum encountered a changing portfolio of terms and concepts encouraging them to approach their single state in the spirit of management and enterprise or – as Eva Illouz has suggested – of ‘emotional intelligence’ whereby ‘emotional management and emotional success’ are ‘explicitly’ connected.²⁰⁰ This message came from the media, a small crop of dating manuals and from matchmakers themselves. A *Guardian* journalist wrote in an article about high numbers of single women signing up at dating agencies:

Emotional identification with our working environment has led us to apply goal-oriented office skills to finding a mate. If you’re looking for a job, you go to an employment agency; if you want a holiday, you call a travel agent; if you want a partner, why not try a dating agency?²⁰¹

Karen Mooney, of the Sarah Eden agency agreed. ‘People don’t want to waste time...It’s better to put your cards on the table at the start. That way, you’re fishing where the fish are’.²⁰²

In the final section of this chapter, I want to focus on two examples of this genre, which – written as tailored, well-intentioned guidance for ordinary singles – are more telling than the faster-flowing cascade of media representation around singleness in the 1990s.²⁰³ They provide the final piece of the contextual landscape out of which grew the dense and motley crop of commercial matchmaking ventures between 1970 and 2000, and which were instrumental in the development of ‘the single’.

²⁰⁰ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 202; mediated dating, particularly computer dating and lonely hearts advertising, was by no means a middle class-only pursuit, though – as this advert in *Singles* makes clear, all types were sought: ‘Rough, tough, adventurous working-class wanted (trucker? Copper?)’, John Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 10.

²⁰¹ “‘Our eyes met across a small column...” From small ads to agencies, dating is big business these days – and young women are its keenest customers’, *The Guardian*, 31 Jan 2000, p. B6.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ ‘Bridget Jones: now all over TV: Helen Fielding’s book has a lot to answer for...soon you won’t be able to switch on without seeing a thirty-something confessing all in a soap doc’, *The Guardian*, 23 March 1998, p. C10.

For singles lacking Helen Fielding's 1996 creation Bridget Jones's charmed way with chardonnay, lecherous colleagues and close-knit friends, not to mention a family with eligible connections like Mr Darcy, it was necessary to take control. Across the period from 1970 to 2000, but with increasing intensity in the 1980s and 1990s, intense efforts were made by matchmakers not only to normalise but to render mediated dating as sensible and even aspirational. The status of mediated dating remained volatile, but the sometimes intense stigma that remained was set aside a solidifying lingo of pragmatic life management, aligned in ways it hadn't been in the 1970s to the concept of professional busyness. Two figures emerged: the upmarket, time-poor professional keen to outsource the quest for romantic felicity and the more middle of the road provincial single suffering loneliness but – thanks to ever-more dating experts – endowed with more options. John Cockburn, like Tony Lake, was a teacher-turned-psychologist who in the 1980s joined the ranks of experts and amateurs in the psychological and social sciences that were turning their attention to psycho-sexual dilemmas. Like Lake, Cockburn focussed on those predominantly facing the provincial rather than the prosperous urban professional single. His book *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (1988) proposed to delve into the hidden meaning of the lonely hearts ad in the 1980s, interviewing users and ad managers, and analysing content. Cockburn felt that – whatever the reasons for the popularity of the method – ‘what is sure’ was an increase in loneliness ‘in modern-day society’.²⁰⁴ For Cockburn, as for the commentators discussed above, loneliness was considered in psycho-epidemiological terms as ‘one of the great unrecognised epidemics’.²⁰⁵ Nonetheless he provided a nuanced analysis of the gendered pressures facing the uncoupled, remarking that ubiquitous marketing and entertainment imagery depicted traditional heteronormative pairings, and that even if the ‘same old stereotypes’ had not yet caught up with reality, they left singles feeling ‘short changed and displaced’.²⁰⁶

So Cockburn was admiring and encouraging of those who took steps to change those feelings, noting that advertising took ‘guts and enterprise’.²⁰⁷ He set about helping readers, glossing hundreds of ads to reveal what worked and what didn't – self-deprecating worked better than ‘company director with yacht and second house in

²⁰⁴Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 2.

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*

²⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 9.

Paris’.²⁰⁸ Above all, Cockburn commended the ads that displayed ‘considerable self-knowledge’ – though like one taking up a whole paragraph long in *Time Out*, they could cost dear at £200.²⁰⁹ In this context, mentioning shortcomings could be a bonus, showing ‘how balanced, self-aware and sincere’ the advertiser was.²¹⁰

In itemising the pluses and minuses of mediated dating through the personals, Cockburn himself deployed a language of economics, using an extended metaphor to explain the demand for ‘single girls’, intensely courted for providing ‘payoffs wrapped in sexual, emotional and financial terms – the ones that count...they are in a buyer’s market compared to many other groups, but especially when they’re trading relationships.’²¹¹ In some ways, ‘advertising’ was a zone of business rather than sentiment, though certainly not necessarily the mark of the ‘bruisedness’ Raban saw.

This thesis argues that the context of romantic production problematized or cancelled out the production of romantic feeling among mediated daters and I will return to this in more depth in Chapter Four. Certainly, in these accounts of the business of dating, couched explicitly in economic terms, a non-romantic vocabulary was clearly being used. Those embracing the business metaphors for their mediated dating were doing so to signify approach, rather than the feeling or even a strong desire for a specific outcome. Adrian, a diamond merchant, said: “I hope that I might meet a girl by accident but I haven’t done that for a long time. That’s exactly why I started advertising”.²¹² Others, like ‘Susan’, adopted the same systematic approach to dating as they might to problems at work. Cockburn’s language and Susan’s merged in their common vision of heart management. Noted Cockburn:

Susan is a highly experienced lonelyheart user and consequently has developed skills and insights into the ‘management’ of lonelyheart activity. She keeps a folder by the phone containing all the details and has a quick reference system. Susan can locate an ad or letter within moments while on the phone to a caller.²¹³

²⁰⁸Ibid., p. 28.

²⁰⁹Ibid., p. 40.

²¹⁰Ibid., p. 45.

²¹¹Ibid., p. 58. Economic metaphors became widely used in American sociological studies of newspaper lonely hearts in the 1980s, taking part of a longer history of dating and marriage market metaphors: see Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in 20th Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), and recently, Moira Weighel, *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

²¹²Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 99.

²¹³Ibid., p. 74.

Susan's system was indeed professional-seeming and she seemed proud of that aspect: conceiving of the process of whittling down candidates as a 'job', she told Cockburn: "What I do is put an asterisk by all the ads I think are possible...I answer about six a week, just working my way through the men's section from beginning to end".²¹⁴ Concluding his analysis of the tactics of those who scoured the personal columns, Cockburn reflected: 'We are also shown that certain skills or techniques are involved and these improve with practice. Their use can greatly enhance the efficiency of lonely heart dating'.²¹⁵

The skills emphasised by Cockburn revolved around efficient processing of information about the self. But they also included developing the ability to read others, and speed and confidence of assessment among daters was another key aspect of a more seasoned crop of lonely hearts. After selecting his date from two piles ordered according to calligraphic prowess and pictorial attractiveness, the diamond merchant was amused but not convinced. With easy certainty, and showing command in the last clause of relationally-intelligent lingo, he recalled that it was "successful and pleasant [but] I wasn't that keen...her emphasis on travel was alien to me and we didn't really gel".²¹⁶ His date was hardly likely to be heartbroken, having offered a casual excuse for meeting him: "she answered my ad because her group of friends had become claustrophobic".²¹⁷ Themes of efficiency and privacy that would come to underpin the use of internet dating were also part of the professionalised approach to dating. One dater enjoyed the fact that lonely hearts meant: "I could be selective in the privacy of my own home," where "I picked out those ones that complied with what I was asking for. You have to use some sort of yardstick to whittle down the field". Compliance, processes of elimination; this was the ossifying language of a self-controlled, platform-based approach to increasing chances that would find full realisation in the algorithms of the internet age.²¹⁸

²¹⁴Ibid., p. 72.

²¹⁵Ibid., p. 81.

²¹⁶Ibid., p. 102.

²¹⁷Ibid., p. 103.

²¹⁸Ibid., p. 192.

Linda Sonntag, a sex writer, used a different but still professional set of tropes in her useful map of dating services as she found them in 1988.²¹⁹ If Cockburn used management metaphors, Sonntag tuned in to electronics: 'I hope this book will encourage you to plug into the network of single people and see who lights up.'²²⁰ Sonntag shared Cockburn's admiration for those who took enterprise culture into their love lives, and her book was designed to help clear up misconceptions about this 'enterprising way of getting together'.²²¹ Her book also demonstrated a keen attention to precision of wording in the advert, advising on syntactical strategy to help people repelling readers who increasingly placed value judgements in demonstrations of emotional intelligence and taste rather than in vital statistics like income and profession. Being 'natural' and keen on the idea of romantic chemistry – thereby overriding the materialism of the method – was important. Sonntag enlisted Frances Pyne, Dateline's press officer, to advise. Good words were, in order of preference: 'Sense of humour', then 'caring', then 'attractive'. 'Slim' and 'graduate' were also good, while 'fat', 'smoking', 'sexy', 'handsome', 'funloving', 'hunk', 'gent', 'cultured', 'refined', and 'loves cuddles' sent people running.²²²

As demand for dating services grew, and strategies were refined to reflect wider shifts in occupational culture, matchmakers were keen to capitalise on the new figure of the busy Thatcherite professional. Financial deregulation in 1986, the promotion of entrepreneurs and the demarcation of enterprise zones created waves of discourse about wealth increase and professional ambition as hallmarks of the decade. Matchmakers portrayed themselves as a new kind of expert: the bosom friend able to help the busy career person outsource his or her most intimate needs. Hedi Fisher was one matchmaker who adapted swiftly to boom-time sales rhetoric, avoiding any question of stigma or the complex emotional needs of her clients. 'We enrol people in the professional and business world, with high standards, often with busy and demanding lives. We do our best to ensure that our members are attractive, reliable and well-adjusted,' she told Sonntag.²²³ Meanwhile, the Picture Dating Agency offered another

²¹⁹Linda Sonntag, *Finding the Love Of Your Life Using Dating Agencies and Small Ads* (London: Piccadilly, 1993).

²²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1.

²²¹*Ibid.*

²²²*Ibid.*, p. 29.

²²³*Ibid.*, p. 105.

fin de siècle professional's service: it was a 'modern, intelligent and civilised way of meeting people – it's the 80s and 90s way'.²²⁴

The workplace, entrepreneurial and management tropes that increasingly infused the rhetoric of matchmakers, daters and their observers spread out with rapidity in the 1990s to forge a new breed of experts: these were the sexperts, flirt coaches and makeover specialists who – long a staple in the US – began appearing on British television. The sexpert was different from the agony aunt because she was usually young, highly groomed and made for TV. By 2001, the BBC was ready to participate. In 2001's *Would Like To Meet*, Tracey Cox was introduced as Flirt Queen, 'psychologist, author and body language coach', and Jeremy Milnes as 'confidence coach'. Both were to put romantic no-hoper Debbie on 'a six-week assault course to romance'. These two were highly paid experts in reading and recoding humans to make them sexier. Jeremy Milnes said of Debbie: 'We've seen two different people – I want to take the one we saw [earlier] and bring her out, and the one we've seen tonight... get rid of it'. And Tracey tried to teach Debbie through the example of another woman in a bar how to flirt. 'This girl's winning the prize,' she said. 'She's doing rapid blinking, an eyebrow flash, which is what people do when they really fancy each other'. Their comments are particularly pointed in being directed at a woman, but men were not excluded from such treatment either, and could also face withering attacks on their slouching postures or poor grooming.

By the 2000s, intensification of dating expertise, dating culture and dating discourse – apparent in escalating coverage in newspaper articles across tabloids and broadsheets of statistics, crimes and services relating to singles – had entrenched dating as a potentially expensive, difficult, laborious but important pursuit.

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In this chapter I have set out to discuss the principal themes in the cultural, emotional, and social context surrounding the growth of the British dating industry between 1970 and 2000. Key to this is the emergence of the 'single', an identity carved out of new

²²⁴Ibid., p. 118.

emphases on the importance and purpose of love, sex and coupling. I outlined key demographic trends fuelling the singles market; treatments of the single state; the problems it was seen to create, and finally the ways in which solutions to these problems were offered.

Was it possible for people to fully realise themselves as single? On one hand, singles were encouraged to embrace their independence – economically and sexually. But the reality was that most people felt a longing to change their status, their desires shaped by a tangle of internal and external pressures. Psychologists, agony aunts and other experts – however compassionately they addressed their subjects – promoted a similar double-edged vision to marketers, magazines and romance scripts in films and novels. Being single was fine so long as people loved and knew themselves (in the case of fiction and film, it had to also be a temporary state). Self-knowledge and self-love would also make it easier to meet someone. Yet it was those people at the lowest ebb of self-confidence, the ones whose loneliness and low self-regard caused such concern for Irma Kurtz, Tony Lake and John Cockburn, who most badly wanted a partner. Thus singleness was a respectable romantic status if it reflected rigorous emotional hygiene; for others it ran a high risk of being deeply problematic, and of leaving people feeling socially and emotionally marooned. For marketers, singleness was a boon, but only concerning the well to do or upwardly mobile; once more, the people most in need of attention, the elderly, poor and utterly alone, were of the least interest to both magazine editors and the makers of dating discourse. Without youth, glamour, cash, a social life and resilient emotional health, singleness marked a troubling sort of person indeed. However the numbers of people left out of the young, beautiful, popular and rich categories was very large. The desperate wish of many of them to meet partner or simply to find some friends was a major factor driving the development of the British dating industry in this period, whose anatomy will be drawn in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: The matchmaking industry, 1970-2000

This chapter offers the first full picture of the British dating industry in the period before the normalization of the Internet. It outlines the contours of the industry's growth, before exploring in turn the different layers of its mainstay services of print, human matchmaking and computer dating. The mediated dating market in pre-Internet Britain was composed mainly of newspaper personals, introduction agencies and computer dating and these are therefore my focus here. But the options facing singles also included events networks, or 'friendship clubs', such as Singles Society, whose organ was *Singles* from 1977, and the £10 a year London Village, first advertised in *Time Out* in the early 1970s.¹ While computer dating was the best-known technological approach to singleness throughout the period, sporadic publicity around other, generally short-lived electronic matchmaking solutions pointed to a sustained interest in trying to pair machines with the love quest.² Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in particular, the market expanded to include gadgets such as pocket 'vibe' beepers and 'shuddering' devices, alongside TV text advertising such as the service provided by Prestel.³ The first-ever British dating game show on TV was cited by *The Daily Mail* in 1975,⁴ while in 1978, video dating, in the form of Videomatch, was launched.⁵ In 1981 'radio's first dial-a-date marriage bureau' was said to have appeared.⁶

In the first section of this chapter, lonely hearts ads are presented as the most heterogeneous, flexible and experimental forum for romantic self-fashioning, cross-cut by a gamut of political sensibilities. *Time Out*'s lonely hearts section is foregrounded as a particularly important stage for new forms of gendered self-presentation, sexual exploration and representations of the urban self. With a national and more right-leaning readership and customer base, national magazine *Singles*' lonely hearts section also

¹For first-person memories of the London Village services, see 'London Village – Social Whirlwind of the 1970's' [sic], 19 Aug 2015, lvrevisited70.wordpress.com and *Lonely Hearts* (Thames), 1977.

²On British computer dating, see Strimpel (2017), 'Computer dating in the 1970s: Dateline and the making of the modern British single', *Contemporary British History* (published online). [dx.doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1280401](https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1280401).

³John Cockburn mentions 'shudder' devices in a section titled 'The Commercial Cupids of the Future', in *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (London: Guild, 1988), p. 245.

⁴This is not accurate if *Mr and Mrs*, a 1960s game show, is to be counted.

⁵'Every picture tells a story to the new love machine', *The Guardian*, 29 May 1978, p. 2. Video dating services continued to try their luck through the 1990s; e.g. 'Video Dating Ltd', advertised in, for instance, *The Times*, 16 May 1992, p. 8.

⁶*The Daily Mail*, 'DJ's dial-a-date', 29 Jan 1981, p. 11.

channelled a variety of gender politics in ways that, as I have argued elsewhere, were particularly revealing of the heterogeneity of responses to feminism, including a range of negative ones.⁷ I then move on to map matchmaking agencies in relation to their new identity as ‘introduction agencies’, a term that flourished in the 1980s. The shift from ‘marriage bureaux’ to ‘introduction agencies’ signalled a new approach to dating that shored up the idea that singleness presented opportunities to pursue a well-developed, personal growth-oriented lifestyle as much as to secure a partner. As suggested above, the emergence of the ‘introduction agency’ was also accompanied by new vocabularies of exclusivity that revolved around professional success and earnings. These came through in matchmakers’ marketing materials as well as in daters’ testimony. The latter additionally stressed the utility of developed workplace skills such as efficiency, systemisation and speed in handling a ‘portfolio’ of dates, pointing to yet another intriguing set of overlaps between romantic and economic labour, or between marketization and the pursuit of intimacy. The third segment of the dating industry reviewed here is computer dating, which – unlike the other two platforms – anchored its claims to authority in the modernity of electronic technology. In offering a high-volume service (lots of dates with little filtering), computer dating also sharpened anxieties about the social meaning (and possible sexual menace) of blind dates.

Context: the growth of the industry

Numbers of matchmaking and personals clients appeared to notably increase in real terms in the 1970s. Strict numbers are impossible to pin down, due to the unregulated status of the industry, its overblown marketing traditions hinging on unverifiable success rates, the excuse of privacy concerns in withholding data, and the fact that the people who found their matches didn’t necessarily inform the agency.⁸ But there are

⁷Zoe Strimpel (2017), ‘In Solitary Pursuit: Singles, Sex War and the Search For Love, 1977-1983’, *Cultural and Social History* (online).

⁸Newspaper coverage of dating bureaux, agencies and personal ads throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s included statistics but original sources were never cited beyond ‘estimates’ based on figures released by the agencies themselves. The ease with which matchmakers could keep data murky – e.g. through privacy arguments and non-regulation – yet release figures flattering to themselves for marketing purposes, are recapitulated later among internet dating firms. Match.com, for instance, was sued for touting misleading marketing statistics based on false or inactive profiles: ‘Customers sue Match.com’, *Dallas Business Journal*, 4 Jan 2011. www.bizjournals.com/dallas/news/2011/01/04/matchcom-customers-sue-their-matchmaker.html. Its own lawyers had approached rival firm Plenty of Fish about unsubstantiated claims, admitting, however, that confidentiality might preclude full disclosure: ‘Match.com picks fight with

several facts that suggest a rise. One is the proliferation of businesses, from computer dating services led by Dateline (founded 1966) to new personals sections in new magazines, to a range of new regional and London matchmaking clubs.⁹

In 1970 a Newsnight investigation revealed an ‘estimated...400 marriage bureaux in Britain’ – of which only 24 were ‘long-established’, with most run out of people’s homes, suggesting a recent swell in have-a-go agencies.¹⁰ The *Daily Mail* even ran an entrepreneurial article on how to set up your own dating bureau.¹¹ The most solid indicator of demand – rather than supply – for singles services came from the rise in divorce, which tripled in number between 1970 and 1980 from 50,000 to 150,000.¹² In Britain, the percentage of adults married at any one time fell from 65 in the mid-1960s to 53 in 2006, with the 1970s the decade of fastest decline (after a marriage rate peak in 1972).¹³ John Cockburn, the psychologist author of the interview-led study *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (1988), observed: ‘The agencies are thriving on the burgeoning divorce statistics. We know that at current rates one in three marriages will end in divorce.’¹⁴ Divorcees were folded into the wider pool of daters rather than generating their own agencies. Lone parents, however, eventually attracted a range of specialised services particularly in travel, with help arranging holidays available through the National Council for One Parent Families, single parents charity Gingerbread and more commercial businesses such as Holiday Endeavour for Lone Parents, One Parent Family Holidays and Single Parent Travel Club.¹⁵ Any romantic benefits to such trips were left unspecified, however. There were other regional organisations geared towards helping the lonely and struggling divorced and widows.¹⁶

competitor Plenty of Fish, Gigacom.com, 28 April, 2010. gigaom.com/2010/04/28/match-com-picks-fight-with-competitor-plenty-of-fish/.

⁹Articles referring to new services or increased numbers of customers include, for instance, ‘Marriage: cupid from the computer’, *The Times*, 25 March 1972, p. 16. This article discusses Compat, a new rival to Dateline, in the context of a growing client base. New singles’ forums or dating agencies included Hedi Fisher, set up in 1968, Nexus (1974); Company (1976); and Dateline’s *Singles Magazine*, in 1977.

¹⁰‘The lonely hearts marry-go-round’, *The Daily Mail*, 2 Nov 1970, p. 2.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²‘Divorces in England and Wales, 2010’, Office of National Statistics (ONS), www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_246403.pdf, p. 2.

¹³Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self Control and Wellbeing in the United States and Great Britain since 1950* (Oxford, 2006), p. 336.

¹⁴Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 127.

¹⁵‘Singled out in the sunshine’, *The Guardian*, 8 July 2000, p. F20.

¹⁶E.g. Helping Hand in Birmingham.

Growing interest in an expanding offering of dating services was also posited in newspaper coverage, though the focus was more on the industry, the personalities behind it, and the bachelor/ 'bachelor girl' population rather than the tribulations and pain of divorcees.¹⁷ A search of digital newspaper archives using dating terms such as 'lonely hearts' points to a notable rise in interest in the 1970s compared to the late 1960s (the impact of 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' by the Beatles, released in 1967, explains the rise to some extent but not entirely, as a survey of the articles makes clear).¹⁸ In 1970, *The Daily Mail* recorded that 'The lonely hearts business is booming as never before', and mentioned a sharp rise in personal ads placed by agencies.¹⁹ Television programmes and other forms of entertainment explored for the first time singleness in conjunction with singles services, such as *Lonely Hearts* (1977), *The Love Tapes* (1979), *Singles* (Carlton, 1993), and *Man Seeks Woman* (BBC 1996).

Personal ads

A prefatory note to this section is that while lonely hearts adverts form a cornerstone of this study, my focus is on what was said *about* the personals, rather than in them. There are three reasons for this. First, I want to assess personals' significance within the wider socio-romantic and matchmaking landscape instead of through the inherently self-referential, relatively limited content of the adverts themselves. Second, while the wording of lonely hearts adverts does offer rich clues about semantic and social trends in mediated courtship, their brief, highly codified content also produced a high degree of conformity.²⁰ Harry Cocks has sensitively shown how rich a source personals can be when studied as social tools and discursive objects of concern instead of as individual

¹⁷It is worth remembering here and throughout, as Adrian Bingham has made clear, that newspapers do not necessarily correlate to readers' lives or interests. *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 10. The divorcee's experience of lonely hearts was far from absent, finding vent in agony columns and special interest magazines such as *Singles*, in a variety of self-help books, and in many personal ads.

¹⁸There were 24 articles mentioning 'lonely hearts', meaning singletons in search of a partner, in *The Times* between 1970 and 1980, versus 12 between 1960 and 1970. There were 95 such articles in *The Guardian* between 1970 and 1980 vs 32 in the previous decade, and 91 in *The Daily Mail* vs 47.

¹⁹Although agencies were proliferating, and more people were advertising in lonely hearts pages, media attention exaggerated the sense of growth. As suggested in the introduction, lonely hearts businesses remained relatively marginal through the 1990s. A 2000 survey estimated they were the domain of fewer than one in five single people. 'The Great Date Challenge', *The Daily Mail*, 19 Oct 2000, pp. 62-63.

²⁰Interview with Robin Dunbar, anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist, 10 March, 2015 Oxford. Dunbar was the author of a number of studies of personal ads in the 1980s and 1990s, and stressed the repetitiveness of class 'markers' in the ads.

pieces of text, and it is Cocks's approach I aim to follow here.²¹ Third, the content of lonely hearts adverts have already attracted a sizeable amount of scholarly (and popular) interest across history, anthropology and sociology. Sociologists and anthropologists in particular have been keen to explore the broad, gendered features of mate choice through the personals.²² Historically, their appeal, particularly across broad sweeps of history, is clear. But their sheer quantity at any given time between 1970 and 2000 does not, in my view, offer an equivalent weight of historical insight. Instead, I place more emphasis on the relationship between personals and their host publications than on specifics of the ads. This in turn points to the relationship between class, publication and the attached motifs of self-representation, as well as to some of the textures apparent in late 20th century print culture.²³

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The market for personal ads expanded throughout the period mostly in London magazines and broadsheet newspapers (from the 1990s) but also in some regional newspapers and in publications like *The Jewish Chronicle*.²⁴ More than introduction agencies, personals gained the attention of a wider readership, since they were entertaining, looked-for sections in broader interest publications such as *The New Statesman* and *Private Eye*. In the 1980s, their spread was noticeable enough to begin attracting attention from social scientists and psychological researchers such as Robin

²¹Cocks (2004), 'Peril in the Personals: The Dangers and Pleasures of Classified Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century Britain', *Media History*, 10 (1), pp. 3-16.

²²David Waynforth and Robin Dunbar (1995), 'Conditional Mate Choice Strategies in Humans: Evidence from 'Lonely Hearts' Advertisements', *Behaviour*, 132 (9/10), pp. 755-779; Boguslaw Pawowski and Robin Dunbar (1998), 'Withholding Age as Putative Deception in Mate Search Tactics', *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 20 (1), pp. 53-69; Frank Willis and Roger Carlson (1993), 'Singles Ads: Gender, Social Class, and Time', *Sex Roles*, 29 (5), pp. 387-404; Simon Davis (1990) 'Men as Success Objects and Women as Sex Objects: A Study of Personal Advertisements', *Sex Roles*, 23, pp. 43-50; Kay Deaux and Randel Hanna (1984), 'Courtship in the Personal Column: The Influence of Gender and Sexual Orientation', *Sex Roles*, 11, pp. 363-375; Bob Mullen, *The Mating Trade* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

²³The potentialities and opacities of 20th century print culture have recently been explored in relation to earlier periods, e.g. Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

²⁴Cockburn claimed that the expansion of regional lonely hearts sections was significant in *Lonely Hearts* (p. 7) but it appears that in fact the personals sections of many regional newspapers remained extremely limited – throughout the period *The Birmingham Post*, for instance, which had a substantial multi-page classified section only ran personal ads occasionally and usually not more than one, alongside sporadic individual adverts for local matchmakers. With more fanfare, however, *The Jewish Chronicle* launched its lonely hearts section in 1996. 'JC Introductions Helps Singles Find True Love', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 5 Dec 1997, page unmarked.

Dunbar, the results of whose investigations of mating strategies in lonely hearts adverts were later widely publicised.²⁵ Dunbar, who normally worked on primates, changed tack in the 1980s ‘because [lonely hearts] were so common in newspapers, every newspaper had them at that point, it struck me as a really nice little vignette’.²⁶

Of the most prominent national services, Guardian Soulmates launched in 1995 (going online in 2002). *The Telegraph*’s Kindred Spirits personals section also launched in 1995 (and went online in 2005). *The Times* only added its print (plus voice messaging service) lonely hearts section, Encounters, in 2002. While *The Times*’s decision to offer print instead of online dating was probably influenced by a readership that preferred traditional media, the late addition of Encounters testifies to the fact that print ads retained genuine usage value and popularity. Their centuries-long precedent came from being the cheapest option and from being read by many more people than just advertisers. The A3 sized *London Weekly Advertiser* – dedicated to classified ads of all types – provided the biggest space devoted to personals in the country and was a good barometer of their growing reach. In 1970 the ‘personal’ or ‘friends’ section commanded as many or sometimes more pages than other sections (such as property or motors) and in 1971, the personal column got its own section, formatted separately.

In 1977, *Singles* publisher John Patterson also drew attention to fresh demand among solos. ‘The Classified section is growing and reflects the need which many readers have of expanding their social circle’, describing *Singles* as unique in publishing today – a special interest magazine with a potential 7 1/2 million readers....²⁷ The growth in personals after 1970 was marked: in 1987, *Time Out* ran an estimated 13,000 ads, worth £175,000 per year,²⁸ up from £20,400 per year in 1974,²⁹ while *Singles* had grown from around 200 ads in 1977 to 700 per issue in 1987.³⁰ Together, *Time Out*, *Singles* and *Private Eye* were said to have forwarded half a million replies to 30,000 ads in 1987.³¹ In 1985, *The Daily Mail* declared ‘from the refined souls of *The Tatler* and the ex-

²⁵ ‘Forget love, it’s market forces, darling’, *The Observer*, 14 Feb, 1999, p. 1, ‘Science to watch people by: biologist Robin Dunbar talks to Andrew Brown about lonely hearts ads, Shakespeare and what makes us human’, *The Guardian*, 15 May, 2003, p. B8.

²⁶ Interview.

²⁷ *Singles*, 10 (March 1978), p. 3.

²⁸ Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 22.

²⁹ ‘Why Time Is Running Out for the Sexists’, *The Guardian*, 20 Nov 1974, p. 11.

³⁰ *Singles*, 4 (Sep 1977) carried 230.

³¹ Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 7.

lecturers of *New Statesman*, to the Virgo vegan seeking playful Piscean of *Time Out* and *City Limits*, Britain is currently the world's leading market in the 'heart-search' column business.³²

The London Weekly Advertiser

While the growing personals market attracted analyses rooted in contemporary conditions of social alienation and new freedoms, a portion of the personals landscape retained its links with an older paradigm of courtship, offering something of the self-conscious respectability forged in the 1940s heyday of the marriage bureaux, and foregrounding traditional, less flexible models of gender and class. This aspect of the post-1970 personals landscape took shape in a practice echoing the 19th century matrimonial business model, in which matchmakers placed adverts of behalf of clients. *The London Weekly Advertiser* (1939-1982) was the biggest forum for these ads, with A3-sized pages.³³ The agencies that used this tactic represented themselves with a headshot of a smiling, well-dressed woman in middle age, such as Prestige's Judy Joseph, Elizabeth Merry, Kathleen Kent and a female representative of the Mayfair Introduction Service. With or without headshots, however, agencies that advertised on behalf of their clients were keen to promote the image of a company run by a maternal but shrewd, desexualised older women committed to forging happy marriages while also holding a non-judgemental awareness of the diversity of human need.³⁴ Sexuality was never explicitly referred to in these pages, even while another mainstream publication, *Time Out* was showcasing new sexually liberal vocabularies of self-definition and romantic longing in the personals. But as in Francis Fyfield's evocative 1988 novel about a criminal matchmaker, *Blind Date*, marriage bureau heads were no

³²'Boom time in the lonely heart trade', *The Daily Mail*, 27 Nov 1985, p. 12.

³³This practice continues on a small scale, with Heather Heber Percy still placing ads in 'select' publications for clients of The County Register; see also the small but persistent section in the elite literary journal, *The London Review of Books*.

³⁴The Ivy Gibson agency, for instance, was initially run by a man, and then by one Rita Barker, and didn't include a headshot with its adverts. But the name was chosen to sound respectable and reassuring. On this, see Ivy Gibson, see 'A Trans-Atlantic Bridal Broker', *The New York Times*, 10 March 1981. www.nytimes.com/1981/03/10/style/a-trans-atlantic-bridal-broker.html. There are other examples of dating agencies fabricating names to sound exclusive, such as Gray and Farrar. 'I didn't want a cheesy name for the company,' said Virginia Sweetingham, its founder. So she 'scoured surnames listed in the phone book, picking Gray and Farrar as the most suitable.' 'Lonely Billionaires Roam Globe for Luxury Love Therapy', *Bloomberg*, 24 Jan 2011. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-01-19/lonely-billionaires-roam-globe-seek-luxury-love-therapy-a-craig-copetas. Sweetingham was no stranger to such tactics; her first agency was called Virginia Charles.

doubt aware of the importance of sex in driving business.³⁵ Indeed an in-depth report in 1981 by *Observer* journalist Liz Jobey drew attention to the ‘crystal ball aura’ of Ida Reynolds, one of the most prominent advertisers in the LWA on behalf of clients.³⁶

Indeed prolific matchmakers such as ‘Mrs’ Reynolds (founded in the early 1960s), the Ivy Gibson agency (founded 1946, by Mr and Mrs AJ Masterson, run by Rita Barker – Ivy Gibson was a name chosen at random) and Kathleen Kent agency were adept at putting a respectable spin on a range of relational needs and backgrounds, from severe loneliness to divorce to broken engagements and, boldly, across a range of classes.³⁷ Thus one lonely older working class widow became in Ivy Gibson’s words a woman of:

51, tall, good figure, fair hair who never pretends to be anything but what she is, and ordinary, honest to goodness working class woman who freely admits she sorely misses the love and companionship of a good husband. Very nice looking, smartly dressed, a neat and tidy council flat where she is most content to be after a hard day’s work, but finds the long lonely evenings almost unbearable....³⁸

This was a strikingly bold claim to both emotional authenticity and class identity that ‘freely’ admitted to span extremes from ‘unbearable’ evenings to a smart outward appearance to an uncompromising work ethic. Looking back to the mid-century, Langhamer has explored the ways in which class underpinned romantic choice but in some cases was considered subservient to love.³⁹ However, the power of love to sunder class was downplayed by Moya Woodside in 1946, who noted that ‘husbands and wives resemble each other closely in respect of background, social standing, outlook, interests, even degree of intelligence’.⁴⁰ This version of the relationship between class and romance – in which the chances of a successful cross-class romance were in Woodside’s terms ‘negligible’ – seemed to inform the value system of those using the

³⁵Frances Fyfield, *Blind Date* (London: Bantam, 1988).

³⁶‘Searching for the perfect partner’, *The Observer*, 13 Sep 1981, p. 29.

³⁷See, e.g. *London Weekly Advertiser* (LWA), 3-9 March 1976. On Ida Reynolds’ agency, see ‘Singles: Merry Olde Matches’, *Washington Post*, 15 May 1981. www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/05/15/singles-merry-olde-matches/9a47421c-2d14-4138-a067-11c09ebb0b90/.

³⁸*LWA*, 6 Jan 1972, p. 36.

³⁹Claire Langhamer (2007), ‘Love and Courtship in Mid-Twentieth-Century England’, *The Historical Journal*, 50 (1), pp. 173-196: 185.

⁴⁰Moya Woodside, ‘Courtship and mating in an urban community’, *Eugenics Review*, 38 (1946), pp. 29-30: 30.

marriage bureaux pages, even as the categories formerly governing romance (class, and the intention to marry and have a family) were clearly loosening in other forums.

Need, loneliness, gender and class were foregrounded in intriguing combinations. One female client of Kathleen Kent ‘helped her husband run an extremely flourishing and prosperous business. One day after a tiff, he left never to return....’⁴¹ Although, as the advert implies, it takes two to tiff, Kent presented her as the victim of hard luck wrongfully deprived of her marriage.⁴² Meanwhile, the girlfriend of one young man ‘broke off their engagement after two years. Now at 25 he finds he does not want to move among his former circle of friends but would prefer to meet fresh people’.⁴³ Class was emphasised in a variety of contexts, often combined with gender. Women were often described in terms of the profession – and class signification of that profession – of their former spouses. Thus in the ‘ladies over 40’ section, clients included an ‘engineer’s widow’, a ‘working man’s widow’, and an ‘executive’s widow’.⁴⁴ Class informed the search for a partner with an explicitness not seen in other publications, partly because in other lonely hearts forums the reputation of the publication itself – such as those of the middle-class political magazines *The New Statesman* and *Private Eye* – rendered class bearings more implicit. By contrast, hundreds of adverts like the following were presented each week in *The London Weekly Advertiser* throughout the 1970s: ‘Single lady (nr Croydon) in domestic work, seeks intro to bachelor, widower or div. working class, 40/50, view friendship and marriage’, ‘Widow, 56....factory worker, seeks intro. to working class gentleman...view ult. Marriage’ and ‘Working class man, 40, wants to meet lady friend. Sincere, Brighton.’⁴⁵

As these adverts suggest, admitting explicitly to bad luck, need, and loneliness in the personals was not only acceptable; it also anchored the decision to advertise. Pleas for company that foregrounded severe loneliness and emotional pain were also to be found in *Time Out* in the 1970s. But in contrast to *Time Out*, *The London Weekly Advertiser*

⁴¹*LWA*, 6 Jan 1972, p. 36.

⁴²Comparisons with the self-presentational norms that hardened with the rise of internet dating twenty years later are intriguing: it is now unacceptable or strategically ill-advised to refer to past relationships or to present vulnerability to avoid seeming needy. See, for instance, Doug Zytgo et al. (2014), ‘Impression Management Struggles in Online Dating’, Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Supporting Group Work, Sanibel Island, Florida, pp. 53-62: 57.

⁴³*LWA*, 6 Jan 1972, pp. 39 and 36.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁵Ivy Gibson advert, *LWA*, 6 Jan 1970, p. 37, *ibid.*, p. 36, *ibid.*

personal columns operated within a framework in which singleness and matchmaking were presented as a failure in the romantic marriage market, whose solutions could only be sought within a set of gendered and classed requirements that moved along the axes of traditional femininity and masculinity (the desire for a complementary spouse) and of class homiphily. Co-existing with more ‘permissive’ explorations of singleness such as *Time Out*, *Man and Woman* and even *Singles*, the language and assumptions of the matchmakers advertising on behalf of clients here alerts us, I think, to the ‘syncopation’ of sexual frameworks that I outlined in the introduction, and hints at the benefits to the historian of moving beyond the ‘either/or’ interpretation of sexual liberalisation.

Ida Reynolds, Ivy Gibson and Elizabeth Merry took aim at permissiveness. They explicitly stressed relationships for marriage, reinforcing ideas about proper marriageable age, the urgency of avoiding being on the shelf over the age of 30, and the fairness and prudence of seeking a good male breadwinner. They addressed ‘young ladies’ worried about falling behind. The Ivy Gibson Bureau was most direct, asking women in 1973: ‘Are you under 30? Are the years ticking off, NEVER to come back!; Are you Tired of the daily grind? Bad travel conditions? Insecurity? The TOO permissive society....?’⁴⁶ The desperate search for young women reflected the fact that many bureaux customers belonged to the wartime or pre-war generation, with many divorcees and widows, such that personals were divided into those for women and men ‘under 39’ and those ‘over 40’.

The traditional emphasis of these adverts appeared successful: according to one 1976 promotion, the Ivy Gibson Bureau boasted an impressive 50,000 marriages since 1946, with an all-time high of 3,125 in 1970 alone – though as contemporaries were aware, such claims were impossible to verify, and there was a clear echo of the hyperbole that marked the adverts of Edwardian matrimonial press.⁴⁷ However, the high volume of the ads placed by the bureaux on behalf of marriage-seeking clients drew to an end with the closure of the *London Weekly Advertiser* in 1982, after which self-advertising forums continued to expand. In fact, the growth of self-advertising was already in train from the

⁴⁶*LWA*, 5 Jan 1971, p. 36.

⁴⁷*LWA*, 10-16 March, 1976, p. 53. Liz Jobey was explicit about the untrustworthiness of matchmaker figures in ‘Searching for the Perfect Partner’, *The Observer*, 13 Sep 1981, p. 29. Harry Cocks has drawn attention to the hyperbolic claims of late Victorian and Edwardian matchmakers: The Matchmaker (est. 1926) claimed to be ‘the Most Successful Agency in the British Empire’, *Matchmaker* (April 1927, masthead), cited in Harry Cocks, ‘Peril in the Personals’, p. 7.

early 1970s, with the launch of *Time Out*'s lonely hearts section in 1971, followed by that of *Singles Magazine* in 1977, which grew from four pages in 1977 to a peak of 28 pages in 1983. A range of tools were proffered to help singles get it right when going it alone.⁴⁸ But while the fading of the voluminous personals world of the *London Weekly Advertiser* drew an end to the explicitly marriage-oriented framework in print-based matchmaking forums, some of its more traditional threads surfaced in the marketing materials of the more self-consciously modern 'introduction agencies', as will be explored.

Certainly, when chroniclers of the 1980s dating landscape John Cockburn and Linda Sonntag focussed on personals as the site of expanding demand they were thinking not about the continuation of mid-century marriage bureaux but about a 'modern' paradigm of self-representation and pro-activity in which singles sued for a range of romantic or social ends – not just marriage. These singles, according to Cockburn and Sonntag, were responding appropriately to distinctly contemporary conditions of both greater loneliness and liberty. Yet despite the fact that new forums such as *Time Out* and *Singles* shunned the normative vocabularies around marriage favoured by some of the bureaux, with *Time Out* being the first to accept gay ads, they nonetheless operated within clear moral guidelines. Even *Time Out* 'had to put a note to lonely hearts saying we can't run married lonely hearts' while, according to a 1970s *Time Out*, classified ad manager, Suzie Marwood, 'there were restrictions on what you could say....we had to be clear to people who were confusing free expression with porn'.⁴⁹ The challenge of the mediated matchmaking business had, since the late Victorian period, been to keep itself firmly in the respectable camp of romance rather than in the far more problematic arena of sexual services. Although some parts of the lonely hearts industry took on a self-consciously flexible attitude towards sexual morality in the 1970s, the threat of a sexual underbelly being revealed continued to shadow the business, and agencies and lonely hearts adverts had to insist they were not in fact providing platforms for escorts, prostitutes or porn rings.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Publishers of lonely hearts offered workshops and advice, e.g.: 'Need Help With Your Personal Ad?' *LWA*, 10-16 March 1976, p. 53.

⁴⁹Interview with Elliott, 1 May 2015, London, and interview with Suzie Marwood, 13 July 2015, London.

⁵⁰'Computer dating firm "built up on porn"', *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1983, p. 3.

Time Out

When it launched in 1971, *Time Out* set a new tone within the mediated matchmaking world, becoming the best-known and most widely used personals service in London, and raising the profile of the personals industry.⁵¹ It offered the first service that – woven together with the magazine’s reputation for urban, cultural and subcultural insider knowledge – could be seen as socially adventurous rather than shrouded in the stigma of loneliness. From its inception, the section was closely associated with a new type of reader-singleton that was particularly invested in the metropolis’s alternative culture. By 1981, according to its founder and first editor Tony Elliott, *Time Out* was printing 85,000 copies a week to a readership of 350,000, ‘mostly’ in London.⁵² With its audience of students, young people and those who were ‘coming to London and being lonely’, *Time Out* offered both a vital social network and the first socially acceptable, culturally-inflected forum for lonely hearts.⁵³ Its suspension during prolonged strikes in 1981 showed the extent of the magazine’s cultural impact. ‘Lost revenue now tops £250,000 [in fifth week of absence]’, reported *The Guardian*, ‘but even bigger losses are the city’s fringe theatres, dance and music venues and independent cinemas which report a catastrophic drop in audiences after the disappearance of their main source of publicity.’⁵⁴ The report also drew attention to the ‘plight of hundreds of lonely hearts currently deprived of their means of communicating with each other’.

With its prominent affiliation with metropolitan cultural knowledge, *Time Out*’s lonely hearts service invites consideration of Bourdieu’s theory of taste as a ‘matchmaker’ seeking out ‘affinity’ with other like-minded agents.⁵⁵ *Time Out* offered a ‘field’ in which taste as matchmaker was foregrounded, and in which ‘the socially innocent language of likes and dislikes’ was enacted to promote the ‘astonishing harmony’

⁵¹Between 12 Jan and 22 March 1973 it ran between 26 and 38 lonely hearts adverts per week (this was up to 160 the week 19-25 Nov 1976) compared to around 13 in the *New Statesman* and *Private Eye*. The greater cultural significance of *Time Out*’s lonely hearts is evident in the *Guardian* piece exploring its anti-sexist advertising policy: ‘Why time is running out for the sexists’.

⁵²Interview.

⁵³Interview with Marwood. A discussion of factors likely to have shaped *Time Out*’s readership, such as the effects of immigration and gentrification, is in Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 341-355.

⁵⁴‘ACAS talks raise hope of bringing “Time Out” back: Robert Low investigates a radical Press dispute’, *The Guardian*, 14 June 1981, p. 5.

⁵⁵Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 243.

Bourdieu saw in ‘ordinary couples’.⁵⁶ However we should be wary of assuming that taste – for Bourdieu a key means by which class hierarchies are reproduced and protected – functioned primarily in relation to class reproduction here. *Time Out* readers shared their London location, but came from a wide variety of backgrounds, and the cultural economy of taste at work in their ads reflected the status of artistic and subcultural knowledge that was at least partly rooted in post-war music culture and its evolution through archetypes such as ‘spivs and teds’.⁵⁷ Moreover, an irony emerges if we consider *Time Out*’s lonely hearts service in conjunction with Bourdieu’s theory of taste and class reproduction: one of the key means of displaying ‘cultural capital’ in the section was in fact to disparage elitism, formal or restrictive social categories such as class and traditional gender roles. Thus popular descriptors for attractive people consciously evaded, to quote one advertiser, ‘all familiar status symbols’.⁵⁸ A sample of terms of desirability from a May 1973 lonely hearts section of *Time Out* included ‘long-haired’, ‘sensitive’ ‘creative’ and for women, ‘warm chick’, ‘uninhibited’, ‘warm’, ‘affectionate’ and ‘sweet girlfriend’.⁵⁹

As a listings magazine with special access to metropolitan culture, it is perhaps little surprise that the lonely hearts section developed the reputation of showing how ‘cool, liberal you were’ – not how middle class or professionally successful you were.⁶⁰ According to Suzie Marwood, the typical male advertiser would be ‘renting a flat in somewhere trendy like Highbury, or you’d be a cinema/ South Bank type’. Meanwhile, the ‘home-loving girlie who loves jam and knitting [was] not going to be a huge hit’ whereas the ‘sophisticated lady who adored Schopenhauer’ would get more responses.⁶¹ The personals in *City Limits*, set up by former *Time Out* employees in 1981, and intended to embody the original egalitarian radicalism of the early *Time Out*, featured even more pronounced versions of these permissive cultural codes. Thus a 36-year old sociology graduate was ‘solvent, leftish, anarchistic...artistic ambitions, particularly sculpture, into creative gardening, decorating....’ while a 29 year old male sought a

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Adrian Horn, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945-1960* (Manchester: MUP, 2009), pp. 115-142; Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 82-96. See also Jerry White’s discussion of the cultural influences such as the music recording industry in creating London in particular as a ‘swinging city’. *London in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 342-343.

⁵⁸*Time Out*, 6-12 April 1973, p. 74.

⁵⁹*Time Out*, 4-10 May 1973, p. 57.

⁶⁰Interview with Irene Campbell, former lonely hearts manager, 13 July 2005, London.

⁶¹Interview with Marwood.

woman for ‘country life, walks, cinema, theatre, individualist life-style’.⁶² Clearly, another dimension of taste in these sections related to a particular metropolitan cultural and social outlook. Performing the same signalling or ‘matchmaking’ function as a love of the natural life or art-house films was a lexicon of the self that supported anti-traditional sexual culture and psychological self-awareness. A 1973 issue of *Time Out* saw male self-representation such as this: ‘together freak, domestic slob, money head...Feels no need for a brood of children’, while a ‘female, attractive, well-bred, sensual’ sought an ‘unemotional relationship....with completely uninhibited male....’. There were a ‘buxom introvert’; ‘two emancipated women’, a ‘tall chauvinist pig’ seeking a ‘lady friend’ with ‘no irritating hangups’, along with a woman who ‘wants so much to be turned on’.⁶³

The section’s popularity was evident in its bulging mail sacks. When two of *Time Out*’s Classified managers, Irene Campbell and Jane Rackham, found themselves stretched with lonely hearts administration, they formed a business, Sidekicks (1977-1982) that specifically handled personals. ‘When we say we had sackloads of post for the lonely hearts we are not kidding you – we employed someone full-time five days a week to help,’ Campbell recalled. *Time Out* was also the most important forum for advertising for dating agencies: Mary Balfour, founder and head of the Drawing Down the Moon agency, said that ‘most of our business’ came from the magazine.

Once more, while Bourdieu’s theory of taste as matchmaker is a suggestive motif for understanding the success of *Time Out*’s lonely hearts, these services were always used by people for whom simply increasing the chances of meeting someone far outweighed the image or political orientation of the service. A class-inflected sense of an appropriate match may have informed most mediated dating searches, but loneliness could trump the specificities of a desired partner, for instance with the man for whom, simply, ‘bad Sundays must end’.⁶⁴ Thus echoing Marje Proops’s analysis of the need in the 1970s for additional sexual and emotional support (as well as information), many advertisers simply expressed pure, precarious need, such as the ‘Schizoid, solitary male student [seeking] sympathetic... woman...for help, friendship and love’ and the man

⁶²*City Limits*, 26 Feb-4 Mar 1982, p. 81; *ibid.*

⁶³*Time Out*, 4-10 May 1973, p. 57.

⁶⁴*Time Out*, 18-24 May 1973, p. 73.

who was ‘losing the battle with life. I’m 21, male, is there a genuine girl who can help?’⁶⁵ In other words, keen romantic loneliness as well as the realities of social dislocation meant that all lonely hearts sections – including *Time Out*’s – attracted a heterogeneous client base. *Time Out* editor Simon Garfield recalled that: ‘People forget London was like New York; if you were from backwards America and didn’t want to work on Dad’s farm, you would gravitate towards New York, LA or San Francisco. London’s the same; but then, you would come to London with hardly any connections at all. Outside of work, that was how you met people. Lonely Hearts friendship.’⁶⁶

Crucially, the magazine helped stoke broader interest in the lonely hearts genre. Tony Eliot noted that: ‘Throughout my life I’d go to dinner parties and people would always ask the same question – are [the lonely hearts] real? And I’d say, of course they’re real’. Simon Garfield, who joined *Time Out* in 1983 and served as editor between 1988 and 1989, insisted: ‘There were two real reasons to buy *Time Out* at any point in history: it told you what was on at the Odeon, and the lonely hearts.’ By the 1980s, it was plain to John Cockburn, the psychologist author of *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads*, that personals had become such a classic hallmark of the magazine that they added value far beyond the monetary. ‘These columns are playing a pivotal role in the social, emotional and sexual lives of large numbers of Londoners, and they are worth far more to *Time Out* than the revenue they bring in (approx. £175,000 per year).’⁶⁷ Newspapers kept tabs on *Time Out*’s lonely hearts section, too.⁶⁸

In addition, *Time Out*’s progressive politics helped open up lonely hearts practice and etiquette to feminist questions.⁶⁹ The mid-1970s saw internal rows about the sexual content of the magazine’s adverts, including its personals, which were subsequently

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Interview with Garfield, 31 March 2015, London. The expansion of higher education after the 1963 Robbins Report may have led graduates to pursue professional futures in London. For the history of the expansion, see Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London: Routledge, 2006); Ann-Marie Bathmaker, ‘The Expansion of Higher Education: A Consideration of Control, Funding and Quality’, in Steve Bartlett and Diana Burton (eds), *Education Studies: Essential Issues* (London: Sage, 2003), pp. 169-189.

⁶⁷Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 22

⁶⁸*The Guardian* was particularly attuned to *Time Out* news: see level of detail in ‘Why time is running out for the sexists’.

⁶⁹Staffers in the 1970s included feminist activists such as Beatrix Campbell who decamped to *City Limits* in 1981 in a revolt over unequal pay at *Time Out*.

monitored for excessive objectification of women.⁷⁰ This move in 1974 sparked outrage and confusion among some lonely hearts advertisers, resulting in a ‘spate of letters – the largest number the magazine has ever received on any subject – splitting roughly fifty-fifty in their support’.⁷¹ One advertiser who had their advert toned down wrote in furiously, evidently confused about the difference between leftism and raw sexism:

Is this [advertising manager] McCabe’s own priggish personal view? And that she should have the impertinence to be a self-appointed moral adviser to the public! *Time Out* appears to represent a Leftish view of society, so how can it justify such a conservative attitude that McCabe has adopted?

Another threatened to abandon the left entirely over the feminist conspiracy he felt was evident in the editing of his advert: “Your fearlessly radical image is boring....Lust is a must and a biological inevitability (and fun). It becomes increasingly obvious that feminists are involved with tyranny and puritanism.”⁷² Questions around the sexual tenor of ads were important because of the gender dynamics at play. Female advertisers, particularly young ones, were ‘inundated’ with messages, while men received far less attention.⁷³ ‘Most men got about one or two letters, but if it was a busty blonde with a great sense of humour, she’d get a whole stack,’ according to Suzie Marwood. Full-up post-bags for women were also a recurrent image in the documentaries *LonelyHearts* and *Singles*, which showed first-time female advertisers sitting on the floor amid piles of post.

Despite its growing presence and popularity, mediated dating remained on the fringes of relational and courtship norms. Thus even advertising in *Time Out* was ‘not something you talked about’ even though demand was growing. *Singles*, founded in 1977, would become the main solution to the lonely who lived outside of London. But by the 1980s, as lonely hearts would learn, the expression of bald need visible in the previous decade’s personals, was not the best way to sell yourself.

⁷⁰Interview with Elliott.

⁷¹‘Why time is running out for the sexists’, *The Guardian*.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Interview with Suzie Marwood.

Singles

If *Time Out* offered a romantic platform that knitted together the left-leaning politics and left-associated cultural sensibilities of the metropolis with the psychological language of permissiveness, then *Singles* offered a more conservative and regional lonely hearts rival platform catering to ‘respectable pleasant polite people’ the country over who were, in the majority, ‘to the centre right’ of the political spectrum.⁷⁴ A high proportion of *Time Out*’s clientele were graduates while just 25 per cent of *Singles* advertisers were.⁷⁵ Only a fraction of its readers were from London (about a quarter of letters came from the capital), and *Singles*’ choice of topics suggested a readership that was battling financial stress and unemployment, and living apart from the metropolitan pleasures advertised by *Time Out*,. Articles included guides on how to navigate council housing; cost comparison of different types of home heating, and how to be a summer ‘char’ in Saint Tropez.⁷⁶ In our interview, Elliott responded to a mention of *Singles* with: ‘Oh, yes, God it was awful, wasn’t it’ and a face of displeasure, suggesting that *Time Out*’s superior cultural capital rendered *Singles*, by comparison, almost invisible to a metropolitan taste-maker like Elliott.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, *Singles*’ monthly personals section was the busiest in the country after *Time Out*’s and it was the only national magazine dedicated to single life between 1977 and 2004, sold in ‘all good newsagents’ and by subscription.⁷⁸ From the mid-1980s onward, the magazine was more of a catalogue for dating services than an editorial publication, but it remained a significant national presence through the 1990s since its multi-page lonely hearts section was the only Britain-wide offering on the market. Just as *Time Out*’s image and content more broadly attracted lonely hearts advertisers, *Singles*’ position as the only national magazine catering to singles made it a go-to for a

⁷⁴Pauline Chandler, ‘head of Singles’, quoted in Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 11; *ibid*.

⁷⁵*Ibid*. The expansion in the universities sector meant that the category of ‘graduate’ became a widespread metric for assessing background in dating ads, in London and outside.

⁷⁶E.g. ‘Warmth, the economics of home heating’, *Singles*, 19 (Dec 1978), pp. 35-37.

⁷⁷Interview with Elliott.

⁷⁸The national market for newsagents was 18.42 million sales per month as of 1977, and ‘all good newsagents’ numbered around 35,000 in the mid-1970s. Simon Mowatt and Howard Cox, *Revolutions from Grub Street: A History of Magazine Publishing in Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), p. 109. Because it was independently published by firms that have changed name or dissolved since, circulation figures have so far proved unattainable. Based on circulation figures for comparable magazines, *Singles* probably had a print run of about 100,000 in the late 1970s.

wide variety of advertisers.⁷⁹ Unlike its rivals, *Singles* ads worked within the context of a magazine that uniquely paired its intention to 'represent' singles with a solution to their state, and fostered an intriguing mixture of solidarity and encounter. 'Our proposition that being single is rather like second-class citizenship has evidently been felt long enough by many people – it just needed saying, loud and clear', wrote Patterson, the editor (as well as *Dateline's* head).⁸⁰

Sex was treated differently in *Singles* than in *Time Out* or *City Limits*, reflecting the tabloid aesthetic that surrounded pin-up culture and, from 1970, *The Sun's* Page Three Girl.⁸¹ A near-naked or lollipop-sucking woman was featured on the front of every issue in 1977 and 1978. Nonetheless, Patterson hit on changing social mores filtered down from feminism, aligning the brave new world of the lonely hearts 'life style' with engagement (albeit often snide) with the new sexual politics.

The women's liberation movement has not particularly concerned itself with trivial matters like the next drink, but I think it has managed to get the message across to the least militant of girls that they have the right to do what they want. At least, I hope that that is a factor in events.

And further on: 'The wine-bar girl seems today to be able to handle the situation; to know how to say no without offence, or indeed to say yes when she fancies it.'⁸²

Just as *Time Out's* advertisers were a mixture of the culturally motivated and the plainly, desperately lonely, *Singles* ultimately testified just as much to the demand for national personals forums as to the desire for a politicised, singles-aware magazine. Cockburn called its 'truly national' advertisers 'mostly ordinary people spanning the length and breadth of the land'.⁸³ Sonntag's manual characterised *Singles* as somewhat downmarket, but stressed that it was a useful tool with a wide readership, and the use of it by the socially and culturally aspirational Colette Sinclair – who also advertised in the *The Tatler* – showed just how instrumentally daters approached personal advertising forums. Once again, while the distinctions of taste may have structured some singles'

⁷⁹Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 7.

⁸⁰*Singles*, 2 (June 1977), p. 2.

⁸¹Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, pp. 213-223.

⁸²*Singles*, 1 (May 1977), p. 6.

⁸³Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 11.

decisions about where to advertise, the personals were primarily about maximising romantic opportunity and exploratory potential. *Singles* facilitated this on a conveniently large scale. But, as I have explored elsewhere, *Singles* also provided a unique frame for its lonely hearts service, with an editorial package that sought to create singles solidarity, scorned ‘women’s lib’, and promoted a sexual libertinism.⁸⁴ Ultimately, Patterson’s businessman’s mentality meant that the commercial, rather than the singles solidarity aspect of *Singles* was increasingly promoted, and the gender politics that had been aired in the magazine’s letters pages between 1977 and 1983 were, by the mid-eighties, suppressed by the imperatives of the more lucrative personals section.

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Despite their potential for facilitating dangerous encounters, and the anonymity of the sea of strangers they supported, personals roused less friction in the period than dating agencies. They were longer established, more familiar and more self-contained and their codes – sexual and cultural – were usually legible. By contrast, as the following sections show, introduction and computer agencies hit the market with higher prices, ambitious advertising and an energetic press strategy. But they were less transparent than personals, leaving the door open for doubts about fair dealing and value for money. Agencies left greater room for customer disappointment, and allegations of bad value, while the veracity of their claims to respectability as helpmeets to the well-intentioned lonely were seen to be fragile, and revealed the persistence and depth of the faultline dividing sexual from respectable, ‘conjugal’ aims in the mediated dating landscape.⁸⁵ Crucially, the visibility of the matchmaker herself, her advertising materials, and the paperwork and money involved in signing up put heavy strain on the romantic process. In laying bare the context of romantic production, dating agencies revealed late 20th century concepts of romance to be resistant to commodification, even as more people sought a commodified solution to their loneliness.

⁸⁴Strimpel, ‘In Solitary Pursuit’.

⁸⁵John Gillis’s term, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford: OUP, 1985).

Introduction agencies

The British dating agency's origins lay in 19th century 'matrimonial bureaux' which placed adverts on behalf of clients.⁸⁶ A new wave of such 'bureaux' emerged between the 1940s and the 1960s, and continued into the 1970s, featuring agencies such as those discussed above in relation to the *London Weekly Advertiser*. The 'best-known' names, however, were marriage makers Heather Jenner (established 1939) and Katherine Allen (established 1960), both of whom avoided print, instead offering hour-long interviews to every client. In 1981, this cost £5 for an interview and £45 for an introductory fee for Katherine Allen, and a registration fee of £50 plus £450 on marriage at Heather Jenner.⁸⁷ With their focus on courtships leading to marriage, Heather Jenner and Katherine Allen held out against loosening relational norms, even insisting that 'permissiveness' had sharpened demand for their services.⁸⁸

In the early 1970s, the numbers of dating agencies began to rise noticeably. If in 1970, *The Daily Mail* estimated that there were 400 agencies in Britain, it also found that only a small fraction of these were long-established, signalling what appeared to be a new rush into the singles market.⁸⁹ By the mid-1980s, hundreds of new agencies had joined older, more established matchmakers, including dozens of regional businesses.⁹⁰ By the early 1990s, it had become a journalistic platitude to note variety in the dating industry; for instance: 'Whether you are green, glamorous, Asian, vegetarian, handicapped, a farmer, rich, poor, shy or confident, there is an agency for you somewhere'.⁹¹ Agencies with the widest name recognition – not only through widespread advertising across the print press but also through recurrent coverage in feature articles – included The County Register (est. 1984), Drawing Down the Moon (est. 1984), Picture Dating Agency (est. by 1990), Helena International (date of establishment unclear), Hedi Fisher (est. 1968) English Rose (est. 1982), Sara Eden (est. 1988), and Penrose Halson of Katherine Allen

⁸⁶Harry Cocks (2013), 'The Cost of Marriage and the Matrimonial Agency in Late Victorian Britain, *Social History*, 38 (1), pp. 66-88; see also Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2011), and Ginger Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

⁸⁷'Searching for the perfect partner', *The Observer*, 13 Sep 1981, p. 29.

⁸⁸'Finding the right partner', *The Guardian*, 12 Nov 1969, p. 9.

⁸⁹*The Daily Mail*, 2 Nov 1970, p. 2.

⁹⁰Smaller agencies included Nexus, Clover Leaf Companions, Kay's Agency, ('the careful matchmakers'), and regional agencies such as Jane Stephens in Birmingham and Avenues in Essex.

⁹¹'Following fearlessly in Mel Gibson's footsteps', *The Independent*, 28 May 1993, p. 40.

(Halsen took over in 1986).⁹² London in particular was the centre of new attempts to match business with matchmaking, and it was home to successful singles ‘friendship clubs’ such as The London Village, which attracted a young crowd of newcomers to the city, as well as a new crop of ‘wine bars’ seen to cater to the unattached and to provide a welcoming atmosphere to women.⁹³

If the older marriage bureaux shaped their offerings around the appearance of conventional morality rather than type of client, the new agencies had switched to a focus on occupational status. Their proposed client was too busy to meet someone because she or he was so successful at, or any rate involved, in work. This new emphasis picked up on but perhaps over-emphasised themes in British occupational culture in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than being a nation of overtime full-time workers, Britain’s rates of part-time paid work rose sixfold between the 1950s and 1990s, so that by 1990 a quarter of the workforce were part-time (compared to 4 per cent in the 1950s).⁹⁴ However, rising job turnover, the increasing emphasis on entrepreneurialism and the rise of flexitime ‘blurred the edges of the nine-to-five day at its start to finish’.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, increasing affluence and the expansion of the recreational sector meant more employees had to serve the ‘continuous’ demand for leisure services, including on weekends.⁹⁶

For agencies, professional busyness was portrayed as highly gendered. For instance, career absorption was a central theme in Penrose Halsen’s account of the success of her headship at Katharine Allen. Choosing career over personal life was a source of misery for women, while for men professional commitment was an attractive trait that was emphasised.⁹⁷ Yet the reality was that the fastest growth in female workforce participation in the 1970s and 1980s was in part-time work, enabling women to serve a domestic role at the same time. By 1981, women made up 84 per cent of part-time

⁹²While no clear date of establishment appears to be available for Helena International, Heather Heber Percy, founder of The County Register, referred to Helena International, run by Helena Amram who later left the UK in financial meltdown, as a contemporary in our interview, 18 March, 2015, London.

⁹³‘Why wine bars?’ *Singles*, 35 (April 1980), p. 8.

⁹⁴Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990, The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 347-348.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁹⁷Penrose Halsen, *Happily Ever After: How To Meet Your Match* (London: Pan, 1999); Hedi Fisher, *Matchmaker, Matchmaker* (London: Book-Line, 1993).

workers.⁹⁸ In over-emphasising the degree of change in women's working lives, and stressing the un-natural strain this placed on romantic fulfilment (Are the years ticking off, NEVER to come back!) agencies appeared to promote a patriarchal model of work and domesticity while also benefiting from women's affluence.⁹⁹

The demands of an increasingly mobile, fluid labour market seemed to be mirrored in the logics of commodified modern matchmaking as, following the already well-established American market, British matchmakers now styled their companies as 'introduction' agencies. The findings of a *Which?* report in 1983 reflected this switch: 'Marriage bureaux are in the minority,' it noted. 'Most agencies [now] cater to people who might be thinking no further than a few dates'.¹⁰⁰ But busyness and romantic short-termism did not foreclose a preoccupation with 'exclusivity'. Exclusivity was a key sorting mechanism, along with size of customer base and location, that agencies used to attract clients. Unlike the marriage bureaux advertisements in the *London Weekly Advertiser*, which promoted class homiphily among 'working class' men and women, the new introduction agencies directed their marketing towards those who saw themselves as middle or upper middle class, or aspiring to be so. Mary Balfour's £1,900 per year agency Drawing Down The Moon, helped set a tone in which class played matchmaker. 'The whole thing about background, social, educational...a lot of agencies don't understand how important that is. We find that people from different classes just don't mix.'¹⁰¹ Balfour admitted that in order to attract 'writers, musicians' some reduction in price could be offered, since these types of customer were essential to the 'media people'-friendly brand. 'BBC White City should have had a sub office of Drawing Down The Moon: you know what it's like as a TV director; no time for love.' Elsewhere she noted that "'because of the nature of their jobs, [my clients] find it difficult to find the right person of the opposite sex'"'.¹⁰²

⁹⁸Olive Robinson and John Wallace, 'Part-Time Employment and Sex Discrimination Legislation in Great Britain: A Study of the Demand for Part-Time Labour and Sex Discrimination in Selected Organizations and Establishment', (London: Dept. of Employment Research Paper: 1984), 43, p. 3.

⁹⁹The strain of patriarchalism in the dating world was more explicit, widespread and remarked upon in the US, thanks in part to best-selling books like Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, *All the Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1995).

¹⁰⁰*Which?*, Aug 1983, p. 362.

¹⁰¹'One Advert and a Wedding Story', *The Times*, 11 Feb 1995, p. 1.

¹⁰²'Mooning around for a soul-mate', *The Independent*, 14 December 1987, p. 12.

Drawing Down the Moon was among those agencies using new vocabularies to align themselves with a new type of busy professional single. The County Register called itself a service for ‘bespoke introductions’, and claimed to serve ‘town and country’ people, according to its brochure. The English Rose, which put English women together with generally American men, also stressed its upper-class branding: Colette Sinclair, whose memoir *Manhunt* (1989) provided an exhaustive account of her mediated matchmaking career, was described to prospective suitors as ‘privately educated’ and ‘with a charming, well-spoken, cultured English accent.’¹⁰³ The early 1990s saw the advertising sections of newspapers and magazines increasingly fill with adverts for ‘successful’ partnerships. Encounters Dating Agency offered ‘A Summer Romance? Personally Selected Introductions For Discerning Professionals Requiring An Excellent And Successful Way To Meet Potential Partners’.¹⁰⁴ For those with ambition but with less money, there was an ‘Affordable, selective and discreet’ service, claiming to be an ‘excellent and successful way to meet your kind of people....’¹⁰⁵ Dinnermates made its own gender-economic calculus clear with ‘Exclusive Singles Dinner Parties/Social Occasions in Kent and Sussex’ and ‘Professional, gregarious men (35 +) attractive, thirty something ladies’.¹⁰⁶

Once again, Bourdieu offers a fruitful departure for considering the evolution of the dating industry in late 20th century Britain, including how agencies positioned their services in terms of social and cultural capital, and why they so often failed to successfully match customers. In Bourdieu’s analysis of taste, decoding class through taste is an instinctive, immediate and implicit process. Consumption, the sphere in which cultural capital is displayed and read, is ‘a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code’.¹⁰⁷ In the cultural capital-rich domain of art or classical music, for instance, the ‘conscious or unconscious...explicit or implicit schemes of perception...is the hidden condition’ for grasping and making sense of the art. Connecting this idea with taste as a ‘matchmaker’, then, we would expect singles looking for people like them to seek out cultural codes which both could decipher. Mutual deciphering or the

¹⁰³ Colette Sinclair, *Manhunt* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989), p. 164.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times*, 4 June, 1994, p. 26.

¹⁰⁵ *The Times*, 11 June 1994, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 June 1992, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 2.

sense of ‘affinity’ produces the ‘sense of the miraculous’ that is central to successful courtship in Bourdieu’s terms. The common approach of agencies, however, disrupted this process whereas the relatively less mediated lonely hearts ads facilitated it. Matchmakers claimed to offer premium services for introducing people to ‘*your* kind of person’ – a flexible term partly for someone of the same class but also for someone with a commensurate with a socially and professionally aspiring outlook.¹⁰⁸ Such terminology left little chance to demonstrate shared decoding skills, and homogenised useful cultural hierarchies of knowledge into a fairly unitary social ambitiousness inflected with – so the inky adverts with their capital letters suggested – an underlying pressure of desperation. If anything, then, agencies’ expansive, non-specific courting of generally ambitious customers made those daters who did want to meet their ‘kind of person’ work harder by concealing the nuances of the ‘field’ of play. Thus, the mechanism intended to make singles’ mission easier – the supposedly expert deciphering of potential matches by the agencies – actually deprived customers of work they needed to do themselves and that was integral to finding ‘your kind of person’. In doing so, agencies created in the dating process something akin to the ‘chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason’ Bourdieu described of those without the background facing a connoisseur’s analysis of Titian.¹⁰⁹ The result, as we will see, was a high degree of mismanaged expectations, confusion and disappointment: the sense of having been ‘mismatched to such an extent that it appeared that no attention had been paid to a clients desire to meet someone of similar interests’.¹¹⁰

One of the key themes of this thesis is the fact that for many, the reality of dating agency use did not always match branding. As I have suggested, this disappointment may have been exacerbated by the business model of the new agencies, which performed insufficient – because too general – ‘sorting’ work on behalf of clients, and therefore concealed the particularities and, to use Bourdieu’s term, ‘distinction’ of taste integral to the selection of the desirable matches they promised. The mismatch between promises of retrieving ‘your type’ of person and the often random-seeming or undesirable dates procured will be explored more in Chapter Four from the point of view of the customer. From the industry’s perspective, however, several formal

¹⁰⁸Kay’s Agency advert, *LWA*, 3-9 March, 1976, p. 64.

¹⁰⁹Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. xxv.

¹¹⁰‘Faint heart ne’er won fair trading’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 1977, p. 1.

interventions by the consumer watchdog shed undesirable light on agency practices, making transparent the insalubrious caveats that had dogged the business since the 19th century.

The spread of interest in dating agencies and an increase in their number meant that in 1977, Gordon Borrie, the director general of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), had concluded a year's investigation into industry practices. More than 600 complaints filed around the country led him to conclude there was 'a very sorry picture of substantial amounts of money being paid by lonely and vulnerable people for little or no service'.¹¹¹ A further investigation by the OFT was launched in 1981, and the OFT subsequently ordered the industry to improve its practices.¹¹² Stories were highlighted such as that of one Mr Peter Simper, 34, who had paid £150, and 'received no dates'.¹¹³ And while it drew a distinction between the 'top and bottom end', nonetheless complaints related to 'every type of bureau'.¹¹⁴ The most expensive agencies claimed to provide a greater degree of safety than those that offered introductions without personally interviewing each prospective client and the promise of safety was important to singles, as the next chapter shows.¹¹⁵ But following the OFT complaints, they attempted to formalise their standards with the creation of the Association of British Introduction Agencies (ABIA) in 1981, which appeared a more successful project than the stymied attempt to self-regulate that Patterson complained about in *Singles* a few years earlier, following the first report.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, while the OFT discussed introducing a licensing system, formal recognition of the ABIA was rejected and ultimately the dating industry remained unregulated and its practices continued to attract close attention, particularly in the press. A 1982 report by *The Guardian* displayed the unease already in place after a decade of growth, and spoke to the unstable status of the industry in the public eye.¹¹⁷ It emphasised the shiftiness and unaccountability of certain dating entrepreneurs, such as Michael Oren of video dating service Mastermatch. Oren was the bankrupt director

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²For analysis of post-war government-backed consumer bodies, see Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), p. 2.

¹¹³'Why lonely hearts clubs went broke', *The Guardian*, 23 May 1982, p. 4.

¹¹⁴'The price of bliss', *The Guardian*, 24 July 1981, p. 8.

¹¹⁵Heber Percy's disdain for less thorough vetting was particularly strong in relation to personals, which had 'no checks'. 'I think the classified ads are dangerous', interview.

¹¹⁶ABIA website, www.abia.org.uk/advice/the-ABIA-code-of-practice.

¹¹⁷'Why lonely hearts clubs went broke', *The Guardian*.

of a clutch of companies including Mastermatch, a video dating service that had been taken to court three times in 18 months, liquidated in March 1982, and revamped as Masterview shortly afterwards. The article also pointed to the closure of Prestige Partners' newly refurbished premises since January 1982 and to its dodgy maths. The report was meticulous, noting that Prestige's membership of 6,000 had been 'later revised to 1,800'. It further transpired that Prestige had moved office to the home of its head, Judi Joseph, who had also resigned from the ABIA. (Prestige survived at least until 1983, when it was sued for stealing Dateline's questionnaire and banned from using it in its 'Prestige Connections' brochure). Dateline's John Patterson, who was often in the press discussing the need for his product, also seemed to lack respectability: only four out of the 13 companies he'd set up in the past 16 years were still active.¹¹⁸

Moreover, customers who had paid sizeable fees for 'exclusivity' continued to be disappointed – and for good reason. The agency practices behind the claims were slapdash and structured around the pursuit of short-term profit.¹¹⁹ In 1996, Julia, the head of 'sales' at an American-owned, London-based agency that 'certainly did claim to be exclusive', described a cynical business in which anything was promised the client in order to 'make the sale': the fee was £1,500 for four introductions.¹²⁰ The agency priced and packaged its exclusivity in three classes of membership: gold, silver and platinum. From Julia's perspective, the same problem recurred regardless: a shortage of serious male prospects and a glut of 'really super' women.¹²¹ Julia insisted that the primary goal was selling memberships, and that lack of suitable partners was not a deterrent. Did the agency ever manage expectations or decline a sale on that basis? 'Very rarely. We had to get the credit card, and get it double quick quite a lot of the time, so we would just tell them, 'life's not the same without someone else' and get it done if we could.'

When prospective customers sat down for a consultation, they were given a short written 'psychometric test' that evaluated their level of self-esteem on a scale from one to ten. A client's relationship to self-esteem rather than their 'interests', then, yielded

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹For the persistence of suspicion about agency practices, see 'Love for sale: The dating agency industry is a lucrative one where profits often come before lonely hearts', *The Guardian*, 26 Aug 1997, p. A4.

¹²⁰Name has been changed. Interview, 10 July 2016, London.

¹²¹See Hedi Fisher on the lack of men under 35 and excess of 'middle-aged widows', *Matchmaker Matchmaker* (London: Book-Line, 1993), p. 17.

more useful information to an agency prioritising each ‘sale’. To ‘make the sale’, the matchmaker adapted the sales pitch according to the client’s pressure point.

We could sell it on a love basis – if that was the kind of person. Or if people come in talking about their money and property, you sell it on that basis, and say ‘we’ve got lots of people like that.’ You sell people what they want when they come in by listening carefully. I remember one guy in particular who said, ‘will she have a telly?’ And I thought, ‘she will mate, but you won’t’.

According to Julia, ‘it was really easy to sell to a high self esteem person, if you had a nine you had an easy sale, if it was a three it was harder’. But there were some people that were turned away from agencies. At the agency, according to Julia, these were the ‘Nigerian men’ who would appear every evening – ‘my job was literally removing Nigerian men for a while’. And Hedi Fisher remembered ‘one awful occasion a tramp came to the bureau’ and – although he had the required fee with him – he was sent away, told there ‘was nobody suitable for him just now’.¹²² Nonetheless, as the concern of the OFT made clear, the advertising worked, and expensive matchmaking firms found that business was brisk. According to Julia, the agency she worked for had seven people every evening in reception interested in signing up, with a pool of over 500 at any given time. It sustained ‘expensive offices and an expensive staff’.¹²³

By using the language of exclusivity and promising a ‘bespoke’ service for people ‘too busy to find love’, introduction agencies opened a new front in the construction of the modern single. Instead of the personal misfortune emphasised by the marriage bureaux in the *London Weekly Advertiser*, singleness was portrayed as a by-product of professional ambition. Assuming that such careerism conferred income, singles were increasingly in a position to spend money on a ‘lifestyle’ that, as we saw in the previous chapter, would attract the attention of marketers such as Mintel. But the reality was different: not only were agencies unable to produce ‘bespoke’ matches, the singles they attracted were not necessarily well-paid or absorbed in their careers: some were lonely and vulnerable and the willingness to pay the high fees reflected not wealth but need.

¹²²Fisher, *Matchmaker*, p. 17.

¹²³Interview.

Computer Dating

Poised between the exclusivity rhetoric of the new agencies and the take-your-chances world of personals was a third major way to meet a partner commercially. If agencies emphasised the luxury of human wisdom, then computer dating shunned that very wisdom, instead offering the answers of ‘science’ – in this case of computers and of psychology – to help match singles. Agencies stressed an end result: the retrieval of the right ‘type of person’ through matchmakers’ insights and time, while computer dating pioneered a dating-by-questionnaire approach to ‘compatibility’ that would enable a high turnover of matches. Thus computer dating marketed itself as a novel technology that promised quantity *and* quality, through a scientific paradigm that made ‘a messy and imperfect emotional process into a clean, scientific, and rational one—one in which both parties could find their perfect complement and shift with ease into a long-term relationship, secure in the knowledge their match had been electronically vetted.’¹²⁴ And while the introduction agencies of the 1970s tried to appeal to a new kind of careerist – female and male – who was ‘too busy to find love’, computer dating also claimed to serve the ‘modern’ single. The computer dater’s modernity was not necessarily defined through a commitment to a non-stop job, but rather to an outlook that embraced adaptability and pragmatism, and to a desire to enjoy social variety. Dateline, as we will see, elaborated more than any other on what it meant to be a modern, single person – and its role in the nurturing of this identity.

The development of computer dating coincided with the expansion of commercial computing in the 1960s, and the ability of smaller firms to buy and operate machines designed for their use, such as the basic IBM System 3. There were a handful of computer dating firms in operation in the late 1960s, including Dolphin, Compat, Operation Match (an outpost of an American service owned by Compatibility Research) and Dateline, the majority of whose customers were in London and the South-East.¹²⁵ Computer dating firms were classified as budget-friendly agencies, costing around £1 per match at the start; in 1979, Dateline charged £35 pounds for a year’s

¹²⁴Marie Hicks, ‘Computer Love: Replicating Social Order Through Early Computer Dating Systems’, *Ada: A Journal of Gender and New Media Technology*, 10. adanewmedia.org/2016/10/issue10-hicks.

¹²⁵‘Marriage: cupid from the computer’, *The Times*.

introductions.¹²⁶ Costs were kept down partly because the customer had to do the work by filling in ‘a complicated form’, while the computer could handle the insertion of hundreds of forms at once, spitting out the paid-for six matches per person.¹²⁷

By the early 1970s, Dateline, founded in 1966, had left its rivals behind with a widespread print advertising campaign that helped bring it as close to a household name as any dating agency of the period.¹²⁸ Its relative success as a brand was partly to do with its owner’s entrepreneurial zeal: Dateline was part of an umbrella business, Singles Scene Ltd., that included singles holidays and a Kensington singles’ wine bar called Tiles. But its success also reflected a savvy branding strategy: unlike its rivals, Dateline’s marketing material told an origin story that gave it a cohesive role. Patterson, Dateline’s owner, claimed to have been inspired by the original Operation Match, launched at Harvard University in 1965, and used this to stress Dateline’s US-style entrepreneurship and ingenuity throughout promotional features and adverts in *Singles*.¹²⁹

The unifying theme, however, in the story of Dateline, concerned its ‘modernity’, by which it meant its unique appropriateness for contemporary British singles. In a dense, full-page advert from 1980, it explained what it meant by this, putting its case in terms of the categories: ‘The Age We Live in’; ‘The Shifting Society’; ‘What the Friendly Computer Does’; ‘Is Dateline Etiquette?’ and ‘What sort of people join Dateline?’. The first two set out a vision of a social landscape in which the rituals of an older Britain had disappeared to be replaced by ‘the new life-style’, evoked by such features as a ‘social life...changing more rapidly than ever before’; entry into the ‘the space age’, and a mobility unheard of to the previous generation who ‘spent their lives more or less in one place’.¹³⁰ Computer dating was a salve for those who no longer lived in Edwardian times, when ‘the art of introducing people reached its highest expression’.

¹²⁶ ‘The Marriage Market’, *The Guardian*, 30 Jan 1968, p. 7; *Singles*, 21 (Feb 1979), p. 4.

¹²⁷ ‘The Marriage Market’, *The Guardian*.

¹²⁸ Marie Hicks, ‘Computer Love’; ‘Advertising and Marketing,’ *The Times*, 29 Dec 1971, p. 13.

¹²⁹ Britain’s computer dating scene took shape alongside, though on a smaller scale to, the one in the US.

¹³⁰ ‘We’ll make you a believer’ advert, *Singles*, 1980. For a discussion of the Space Age as ‘inextricable from the self-ascribed technomodernity of the 20th century’, see Alexander Geppert (Ed.), *Imagining Outer Space: European Astroculture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave, 2012), p. 5.

The ‘friendly computer’ was introduced as a romantic helpmeet of prodigious ‘power’ – bringing together the force of technology and the human sciences to allow the company to ‘provide you with the world’s fastest, most accurate’ service. The computer embodied the excitement of the modern, and was imbued with a mythic quality typical of computer discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, such that rather than running counter to it, computers advanced the cause of romantic love: they were a superlative way of creating the conditions for people to meet and mate.¹³¹ But the computer possessed a disturbing inscrutability as well, which added an extra layer inflected with both dystopian and awesome elements. Despite their sinister dimension, these aspects were stressed in *The Love Tapes*, Dateline’s promotional video. Shots of the computer’s whirring reels filled the screen and provided punctuation suggestive of electronic power but also of the anonymity and aridity of its industry.

The other dimension of the ‘scientific’ method Dateline claimed to harness was psychology. The link between computational power and psychological assessment had been in train since the 1950s, when computers started to be used for scoring data. This usage built on the ‘punchcard machines’ that had begun to be used for organising data – including the sexological – as early as 1940.¹³² By the time Patterson founded Dateline, computers were being used to help interpret the data.¹³³ Moreover, researchers found computers a particularly useful tool in collecting sex-related psychological data, since ‘respondents may [have been] more willing to reveal sensitive information to an impersonal computer’.¹³⁴ Dateline’s portrayal of the ‘friendly’ computer picked up on the invitingly non-judgemental machine, which would merely process questionnaire

¹³¹Gene Shalit, the American journalist who first covered Operation Match, marvelled at the powers of ‘The Great God computer’ in ‘New Dating Craze Sweeps the Campus’, *Look Magazine*, Feb 1966, pp. 30-35. For the computer’s mystique around 1980, see Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (London: Granada, 1984); Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgement to Calculation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can’t Do: The Limits of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Harper Row, 1972); Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, And the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹³²Donna J. Drucker (2013), ‘Keying Desire: Alfred Kinsey’s Use of Punched-Card Machines for Sex Research,’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22 (1), pp. 105-125, and Drucker, *The Classification of Sex: Alfred Kinsey and the Organization of Knowledge* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

¹³³Margaret Boden, ‘Purpose, Personality, Adventure: A Computational Adventure’, in Geoff Bunn (Ed.), *Psychology in Britain: Historical Essays and Personal Reflections* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 353-363.

¹³⁴James Butcher, Julia Perry and Jungwon Hahn (2004), ‘Computers in Clinical Assessment: Historical Developments, Present Status, and Future Challenges’, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60 (3), pp. 331-345: 332.

data, not judge it. Thus customers were not only offered the computer's 'flash of electronic brilliance' – the rational fruits of its programming – but the fine calibration of a psychologically expert matching questionnaire.¹³⁵ Psychological profiling was a centrepiece of the marketing for computer dating, reflecting the growing interest in personality matching in the psychological and social sciences, and foreshadowing the emphasis of global internet dating firms such as eHarmony thirty years later.¹³⁶

While traditional matchmakers claimed psychological expertise based on life experience and wisdom, the computer dating companies laid claim to the empirical insights of psychometric testing. Frequently referred to by Dateline simply as 'science', psychology was deployed for its ability to truly decode the human self and its desires through questionnaire data. To help design its questionnaire, Dateline employed 'a group of young psychology graduates' and vowed that their work tallied with the 'most up to date research' from Anglo-American universities.¹³⁷ Dateline's questionnaire was indeed extensive, with numerous questions not only about appearance, background, education, moral concerns and partner preferences but also about 'personality'. In this – to follow on from the discussion in the previous chapter – it was mirroring themes in relational discourse more widely, in which the pursuit (or attainment) of a partner was seen as a reflection of the self and its potential.

While computer dating firms' claims to be modern and scientific suggested an improvement on older forms of matchmaking business, they nonetheless raised long-standing questions about respectability and fears about sordidness and fraud. In her study of the intersections between early computer dating and the advancement of a heteronormative model of courtship, Marie Hicks has discussed the idea that emerged from computer dating that 'women and men might meet casually, for sex, instead of within a social context that positioned marriage as the objective' and that this 'hindered computer dating'.¹³⁸

¹³⁵'We'll make you a believer' advert.

¹³⁶For the emergence of the 'psy' disciplines and the extension of therapeutic models across private and public spheres, see Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998); Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, (London: Free Association Press, 1999); and into romance, Eva Illouz, *Saving The Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹³⁷'The Marriage Market', *The Guardian*.

¹³⁸Hicks, 'Computer Love'.

Indeed, the proliferation of dating services tested the limits of permissiveness and particularly piqued the older generation, while concerns about sexual morality and respectability were voiced across the social register. When airline BOAC proposed a travel package to Americans involving holidays in London and introductions to British girls using computer dating, the gimmick reached national news because two MPs considered the suggestion ‘immoral’. In response, BOAC’s spokesman said ‘in the United States computer dating was considered as in no way improper’, though his wording suggested he understood the MPs’ response.¹³⁹ Dateline’s owner, John Patterson, was caught up in two sexual morality scandals that meant the business continued to have a ‘veneer of sleaze’.¹⁴⁰ In 1969, he was arrested and fined £300 for offering to sell several men ‘a list of 200 beautiful, sophisticated girls who would act as escorts and provide a night out “never to be forgotten.”’¹⁴¹ And in 1983, Neville Glick, the owner of a small Harrogate marriage bureau accused him of advertising ‘in almost every pornographic magazine in the country’ and of being known in London as ‘Patterson the porn master’.¹⁴² Glick was responding to a letter that had appeared in *Singles* magazine alleging that his agency had introduced the letter-writer to a non-member – which Glick claimed had been sent to newspapers in the North – and went for Dateline’s Achilles heel in retaliation. There were other individual crusaders, such as Lieutenant-Colonel Norman Pannell, who in 1970 made a complaint to the Home Office after posing as a teenage girl to better gauge the respectability of computer dating firms. Pannell’s complaint came from the fact that one of the computer dating firms he approached asked his views on ‘pre-marital sex and communism’.¹⁴³

Distrust of computer dating agencies took on more formal dimensions, with the OFT investigations of 1976 and 1981 concluding that computer matching firms were contributing to the industry’s mis-selling practices. Concerns over decency and legitimacy also meant that it wasn’t until 1989 that Dateline was allowed for the first time to advertise on TV, buying a 30-second spot on Sky. Chris Quinlan, controller of advertising at the Cable Authority, verbalised a telling train of thought regarding decision to allow Dateline to advertise on TV. ‘We needed to know that it was a bona

¹³⁹‘Nothing immoral in tourist dating, Boac says’, *The Times*, 13 Sep 1969, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰Hicks, ‘Computer Love’.

¹⁴¹Cited in Hicks, ‘Computer Love’.

¹⁴²‘Computer dating firm “built up on porn”’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1983, p. 3.

¹⁴³‘Report on computer date firm’, *The Times*, 29 Aug 1970, p. 2.

fide introduction agency, which genuinely offered friendship... It must not exploit loneliness, nor be suggestive, such as using large-chested ladies'.¹⁴⁴ *The Guardian* continued the report with its own revealing observation that the CA would 'still not allow escort agencies to advertise because of fears that some may be fronts for prostitution'. Sanctioning Dateline adverts on family TV had come dangerously close to opening far darker floodgates. Indeed exactly what was acceptable on family TV was being rapidly renegotiated – it wasn't until 1987 that adverts for tampons and condoms were allowed, with the latter allowed primarily in response to the AIDS crisis.¹⁴⁵

Moreover, with its no-frills, relatively cheap service, computer dating was also seen to cultivate a young customer base with unfamiliar courting aims: men were driven by 'a mixture of curiosity and sexual expectation' while women were keen to meet people 'outside their social class'.¹⁴⁶ *The Times* linked the rise of firms such as Compat to a new informal advertising register that made such services seem young and progressive rather than dowdy. It noted shrewdly that 'the breakthrough for Com-Pat came with the pop pirates', citing the 'opportunity they afforded for vigorous and matey advertising'.¹⁴⁷ But while they positioned themselves at the vanguard of modern society, computer dating services were also keen to tow the moral line, measuring success first in terms of marriages and only second in terms of 'friendships'. Thus Dateline was sure to tell the press that it had (unverifiably) produced its 'thousandth' marriage while in 1978 it devoted a feature in *Singles* to its '10,000th' marriage.¹⁴⁸

Computer dating firms offered singles a means that was explicitly 'modern' in technology and potential. In generating a higher volume of matches, they shaped a new idea of the 'match' that was defined through the impartial and extensive abilities of the machine to crunch data. Yet while Dateline in particular tried to market itself as both socially modern (suited to the 'mobile' populace of the 'space age') and respectable, it too continued to struggle against a 'veneer of sleaze'. Overall, the self-representational strategies of lonely hearts managers, introduction agencies and computer dating firms all tapped into discourse about what it meant to be a modern

¹⁴⁴ 'A first date for match of your life', *The Guardian*, 15 Oct 1989, p. 40.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Bonner and Lesley Aston, *Independent Television in Britain, ITV and IBA 1981-92: The Old Relationship Changes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), p. 276.

¹⁴⁶ 'The marriage market', *The Guardian*.

¹⁴⁷ 'Marriage: cupid from the computer', *The Times*.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, *Singles*, 10 (March 1978), p. 19.

single. All three self-consciously served a population it claimed suffered from an underdeveloped or unstable social network, and provided choice and control to busy professionals, an advantage stressed in particular by dating agencies. If dating agencies were geared towards those who were (mostly) serious about love, and had the means to pay for it, then the less expensive computer dating targeted young people, with new tastes and romantic aspirations. Whatever their strategies, however, respectability issues dogged all forms of mediated dating – whether traditional marriage bureaux, small ads or technologically ‘advanced’ machine-aided matching – helping keep in place a stigma that would last into the next century. The layers of this stigma and the anxieties surrounding mediated dating will be explored in the next chapter through attention to media discourse.

It should be noted that as the 1980s drew to a close with an expanded offering of dating services, users of mediated matchmaking platforms were still accustomed to a level of personal attention unimaginable to internet daters. In particular, people placing ads in publications from *The Times* to *Time Out* to *Private Eye* took for granted that a human or humans, not an algorithm, was taking their cash and aiding their bid for love. Hand-delivering an ad to a magazine was a fairly common mode of delivery, and many ads were placed through the phone.¹⁴⁹ David Jones, ad manager of the Heartsearch column at the *New Statesman* in 1988, noted:

On the phone they tell us all sorts of intimate details about their relationships and sometimes they get very upset. We inevitably get into a fair bit of counselling when this happens. I’ve spent over an hour on the phone with people in the past, and have even subsequently received letters of appreciation.¹⁵⁰

Jones added the *New Statesman* sometimes helps with wording. ‘We always advise humour as we know from experience that this works well.’¹⁵¹ And the ad managers were themselves drawn into personal stories of their customers: ‘One interesting point,’ said Jones, ‘is that sometimes the advertisers flirt! I’ve been asked away for the weekend on more than one occasion....’¹⁵² Meanwhile, Celia Bogget, ad manager of *Private Eye*, was personally responsible for each ad. ‘I wouldn’t print something that said sexual

¹⁴⁹Simon Garfield, former editor of *Time Out* (1988-1989) recalled seeing people drop letters off. Interview, 31 March 2015.

¹⁵⁰Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 24.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 25.

encounter wanted or that sort of thing because it is a love column, it's called Eyelove remember.¹⁵³

Even Dateline – whose matchmaker was a computer – had a well-known face at the helm in John Patterson. With the launch of *Singles*, Dateline had provided numerous pages of space for readers to write in about its services, in addition to the opportunities provided by the hundreds of its affiliated Singles Societies around the country.

Whatever organ of self-publicity daters chose, from agencies to computers, there were faces and names helping (or hindering) them along the way. Seen from the vantage of Celia Bogget or David Jones, the depersonalisation of the dating process was still decades away. Nonetheless, as this chapter has shown, the expanded range of mediated dating services struck observers as a fundamentally modern sign of a widening compass of freedoms, as well as of the uncertainties, anxieties and feelings of alienation that accompanied them.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 27.

Chapter Three: Representations and flashpoints

Having mapped the contours of the industry itself in the last chapter, here I turn to representations and perceptions of mediated dating. I track the growing media interest in matchmaking and singles, drawing out a set of flashpoints that arose around what it meant in terms of gender, class and safety to meet strangers. With a focus on (mainly but not exclusively) print depictions of mediated dating, it should be emphasised that newspapers brought together strands that were essential to the growth of mediated dating and moulded customer expectations. They ran feature and news articles that drew on relevant themes from social aspiration to danger, building up the image of dating as a truly modern pursuit, and providing a key forum for agency advertising. But the lifestyle and social features were tempered by the regular stream of stories about danger, fraud and crime in the personals, as well as the unscrupulousness of matchmakers, resulting in a constantly shifting and unstable status for dating agencies.

Historians have become increasingly interested in the roots and after-effects of ‘neoliberalism’.¹ While neoliberalism is used as a general explanatory framework for thinking about the sharpening of pro-market and consumerist attitudes in post-1970s Britain, the historiography has tended to focus on economic and social policy and the seepage of free-market ‘ideology’ into heightened consumption.² The ways in which ‘the rhetoric of the marketplace’, however, shaped or were reflected or rejected in internal aspects of life such as psychology, emotions and self has, however, been less

¹Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Ben Jackson, ‘The Think Tank Archipelago: Thatcherism and Neoliberalism’ in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher’s Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012); Monica Prasad, *The Politics of Free Markets: The Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2012), ‘Neoliberalism and Morality in the Making of Thatcherite Social Policy’, *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2), pp. 497-520; Matthew Francis (2012), “‘A crusade to enfranchise the many’: Thatcherism and the “property-owning democracy””, *Twentieth Century British History*, 23 (2), pp. 275-297; Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 211-19; Charles Leadbetter, ‘The Politics of Prosperity’, Fabian tract no. 523 (London: Fabian Society, 1987).

explored in this period.³ While this thesis does not offer a full engagement with ‘neoliberalism’, I include it here as a term offering one entry point for thinking about the markedly entrepreneurial approaches adopted by matchmakers and those who wrote about them in the 1970s and 1980s.

The interest of TV producers, journalists and editors in singles services rose sharply throughout the period, not necessarily in strict relation to the number of services provided, but rather, I argue, as part of an overall expansion in media coverage of themes related to sex, gender and lifestyle. At the centre of this representational landscape was print, and national newspapers ‘reflected and shaped’ sexual culture on a number of fronts, including trends in understandings of romance.⁴ As Bingham has demonstrated, sex, marriage and family demographics were major themes throughout the 20th century in British newspapers. Singleness and dating overlapped to some extent with these, but tapped more clearly into post-1960s media debates over permissiveness, ‘the Great Debate’ and the ‘subject of our times’.⁵ Permissiveness had become ‘the frame through which journalists observed the nation and they ceaselessly looked for new angles on this defining story of the age’.⁶ Mediated dating offered several such angles: indeed, the sheer range of ways ‘lonely hearts’ and matchmaking services inspired or shaped representations in both culture and in discourse, from plays to metaphors, in different platforms and across complex moral registers, was striking. ‘Lonely hearts’ could be the topic of a play reviewed in the arts pages, considered in relation to complaints about a dating agency, a metaphor for the German motor trade in the business news, or the subject of personal reflection usually by a single woman in her 30s. But in addition to running reviews on *sinfoniettas* and films about lonely hearts, newspapers’ main interest lay in claims of remarkable growth in the lonely hearts

³Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Commerce, Masculinities and Social Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 5; Terri Chettiar (2016) has demonstrated the commutability of external agendas and internal aspirations in a study of post-war marriage guidance, showing how the rhetorics and concerns of the state (rather than the market) influenced romantic and emotional norms in post-war Britain. “‘More than a Contract’: The Emergence of a State-Supported Marriage Welfare Service and the Politics of Emotional Life in Post-1945 Britain”, *Journal of British Studies*, 55 (3), pp. 566-591.

⁴Lucy Delap (2010), review of Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, *Journal of British Studies*, 49 (1), pp. 224-226: 224.

⁵*The Daily Mail*, 6 May 1971, pp. 18-19, cited in Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 122.

⁶*Ibid.*

market.⁷ *The Times* noted in 1995, for instance, that the ‘boom in introduction agency business during the past 15 years means there are now 90,000 clients compared with 50,000 in 1980’.⁸ The *Daily Mirror* suggested that introduction agencies’ reach was even more extensive, based on the same (uncited) source.⁹

In addition to reporting on the growing demand for singles’ services, print media maintained a distinct relationship to the world of lonely hearts in other ways. Broadsheet coverage helped established singles’ expectations of dating services, while also making space for first-person feature articles about the experience of using such services.¹⁰ And with the publications that ran personals, print allowed readers to vicariously consume lonely hearts experiences, since many more people read the ads than placed them or even responded to them. Print, then, was the forum in which mediated matchmaking unfurled its dimensions in terms of information, experience, the quest for encounter, and the invitation to daydream. Crucially, the focus on newspapers will also allow me to explore a set of frictions that arose as the media debated the legitimacy of the dating industry and interrogated points of contention. But television also offers important clues, thanks in particular to a set of documentaries that investigated mediated matchmaking, and these will also be discussed.

Coverage of mediated dating provides a unique point of departure for understanding the flux of ideas surrounding gender and romance in the period because it highlights the play of anxieties and opinions about women’s status, money, class and danger. The recurrence of these themes testified to an enduring confusion over what it meant to be sexually modern, and kept mediated dating stigmatised. However, it is important to note, echoing Bingham, that the media is not monolithic, and mediated dating was subject to a range of emphases, with representations of failure, danger, urban alienation as well as positive depictions varying across publications.

⁷Novels with an intrigue revolving around lonely hearts adverts included detective thriller *Lonely Hearts* by John Harvey (London: Mandarin, 1989), and *Take One Young Man* by Vivien Kelly (London: Arrow, 1999). In addition to TV shows, plays, film and visual art. The sinfonietta that took its cue from lonely hearts was the Lonely Hearts’ song cycle by Dominic Muldowney which ‘takes for its text some of those intriguing, sometimes sad advertisements in the magazine *Time Out*’, *The Times*, 9 March 1990, p. 18.

⁸‘Lonely hearts can lose a fortune when they play the dating game: Dating agencies’, *The Times*, 13 Feb 1995, p. 22.

⁹‘Why we can’t just fall in love any more’, *The Daily Mirror*, 14 Feb 1995, p. 7.

¹⁰‘Why I hang up on the lonely heart callers’, *The Daily Mail*, 20 June 1987, p. 12; ‘Searching for the perfect partner’, *The Observer*, 13 Sep 1981, p. 29; ‘Passion fruitcakes’, *The Times*, 23 Feb 1991, p. 6.

This chapter is divided into three parts, each dealing with a different set of tensions associated with the rise of mediated dating. The first section explores anonymity and illegibility, the locus of a number of anxieties about third-party matchmaking. The second section analyses class and social status. Attention to the ways in which class was interwoven into mediated dating stories shows the striking degree to which discourses of aspiration and elitism co-existed with (often gendered) concerns about what happened when people of different backgrounds were paired together. The third flashpoint concerns the ways in which dating was often portrayed as an engagement with an ongoing sex war, with different rules of engagement and consequences for men and women. Much of the gendered discourse relating to mediated matchmaking suggested that single women and single men were destined to fail in mutually satisfying the other due to irreconcilable differences in desire and outlook.

Anonymity, illegibility and peril: anxieties about dating strangers

In *The Love Tapes*, Dateline's promotional documentary, there was a section dedicated to showing women how to negotiate the 'blind' element of the dates arranged through the agency. 'If you're the cautious type, you might not like the idea of a blind date, but you can of course ask for a photo before meeting or make a survey from a safe distance'. A woman was then shown peering out from behind a clothes rack at an outdoor market, and deciding against the somewhat shifty-looking man clearly waiting for her. 'But,' the narrator continued, casting doubt even on this precaution, 'looks, as everyone knows, can be deceiving.'

In addressing fears about the 'blind date', Dateline was engaging with a central trope in dating agency discourse, in which the clientele was seen as a conglomeration of unknown quantities. As a range of observers made clear, it was, on a basic level, impossible to be sure that the person you were meeting was single, solvent, and sane. And there was a decided element of sexual danger, depicted in *The Love Tapes* in a scene in which man was shown trying to put his hand under a woman's skirt: 'Of course there are always a few sharks, seeking sexual adventures'. The threat for the dater in London was also emphasised. As discussed in the introduction, the city's 'sexual exceptionalism'; its 'brighter lights', 'later hours', its alleyways, crowds and dens could be dangerous, and required women to be extra careful when meeting strangers. It also

fuelled some powerful imaginative evocations, such as Frances Fyfield's *Blind Date*, a dark thriller of misogynistic violence revolving around the meetings arranged by a scheming matchmaker. Combining the dangers of sex, city, and strangers, *Blind Date* allowed Fyfield to exploit 'the menace of city life'.¹¹

The blind date, then, was synonymous with the perils and excitements of commercial but anonymous matchmaking forums. The anonymity and uncertainty as well as the unknown logics of the increasingly blind date-dependent matchmaking landscape were rolled out in two main ways. The first was contextual, presenting blind dating as a necessary result of social development, and a pragmatic solution with exciting opportunities if carefully managed. The second focussed on the equally inevitable result of crime, with the singles market, and London in particular, rife with the sordid effects of loneliness. John Cockburn pinpointed this duality accurately when he mused: 'What is the truth behind the lonelyheart ad? Is that plea a last ditch scream for help from someone who through emotional inadequacy finds themselves in a deep well of chronic loneliness? Or is it a rational response by the person whom through external and unavoidable circumstances, simply finds it difficult to meet others and begin more intimate relationships?'¹² For some, such as Joan Ball, head of Dateline rival Compat, the 'rational response' argument was a matter for 'messianic enthusiasm' and she was given the opportunity to express this view in *The Times*. Blind dates, Ball suggested, were the necessary antidote to increasing isolation: the anonymity of the modern single's life required an equally anonymous but pro-active approach.

Central to the idea that dating agencies were a natural response to modern social conditions was a vision of a vanished past. Quoted in *The Times*, Ball noted: 'Everyone used to mix such a lot more than they do now, in dance halls and social clubs and so on. But now people are more wrapped up in their own little worlds: they just go home and watch television...' ¹³*Man & Woman* also set the rapid proliferation of mediated dating within a modern setting that required it. Thus an in-depth discussion of the whys and wherefores of the dating industry was headlined in terms of the contrast between past and present. 'Meeting the ideal partner may seem an impossible dream. Do marriage

¹¹P.D. James endorsement, inside cover of Frances Fyfield, *Blind Date* (London: Bantam, 1988).

¹²John Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (London: Guild, 1988), p. 2.

¹³'Marriage: cupid from the computer' *The Times*, 25 March 1972, p. 16.

bureaus hold out the chance of finding love and companionship in the impersonal chaos of modern life?’¹⁴ Often, though, when customers were quoted in press reports for their favourable views of agencies, they rephrased the idea of the ‘impersonal chaos’ of modern life as an awareness of the need to expand social opportunities, itself a ‘modern’ measure and perspective.¹⁵ ‘If you join to expand your circle and meet new people,’ one dater told *The Guardian*, ‘then something is more likely to develop from that in a natural way. It’s all very civilised and modern.’ Matchmakers grasped this idea firmly, such as the head of the Picture Dating agency, who, as mentioned in the last chapter, called this ‘a modern’ way of meeting people. He was careful to explain that ‘no one there is short of friends or short of people to go out with, they are just looking for someone different’.¹⁶ The motive was the maximisation of social potential, not a sign of weakness or failure, something which all matchmakers promoted in their branding and press quotes.

For others, the contrast between present and more ordered past was more problematic, and winked at other signs of troubling change. There was some concern about a new social order, in which a society unhinged from its community roots could also become unhinged from sexual prudence, mistaking lust for love and perhaps abandoning decency and morality entirely. ‘Compared with our grandparents,’ wrote a *Times* journalist in 1976, ‘our increasing social and geographical mobility has vastly increased the numbers of our transitory encounters with other people, and so the number of opportunities for infatuations based on physical appearance.’¹⁷ The appearance of Videomatch in 1978 seemed to corroborate fears about the mechanisation, commercialisation and generalisation of lust in the guise of a matchmaking service. Following the launch of Videomatch, *The Guardian* worried about female sexual behaviour. ‘One girl said [on her video profile that] she was interested in ‘screwing around’ while another said she would not go out with coloured or foreign men’.¹⁸ These

¹⁴*Man & Woman: The Marshall Cavendish Encyclopaedia of Adult Relationships* (London: Marshall Cavendish, 1970), 7 (88), p. 2460.

¹⁵Giddens places the multiplication of sexual and social options for both men and women at the centre of his account of the transfiguration of ‘modern’ personal life. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 8.

¹⁶For an urban perspective on what it meant to ‘go out with’ people in the 1970s and 1980s, see Jerry White on the expansion of clubland across geographies and classes in *London in The Twentieth Century: A City and Its People* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 341-351.

¹⁷‘Mysteries of choosing a partner’, *The Times*, 12 Aug 1976, p. 12.

¹⁸‘Every picture tells a story to the new love machine’, *The Guardian*, 29 May 1978, p. 2.

lapses in sexual morality and decency were presented as a function of the ease with which mediated dating services provided singles (and especially women) with strangers.

People in favour of older, more personal romantic mechanisms focussed on the meaning of computer dating, the hallmark of a modern method in terms of technology and – with its lower price tags – an ethic of disposability. Those with a vested interest in more traditional approaches disparaged the computer's anonymity. 'Computers are so impersonal,' noted Rita Barker, matchmaker of the Ivy Gibson Bureau, in 1981.

Suppose for example that one of my gentlemen indicates he likes sports. A computer will put down a little tick for sports. But who can say whether he plays squash, or tennis, whether he likes to sail, or prefers to go to the cricket matches? That sort of thing can only come out in personal interviews.¹⁹

Less interested observers, particularly earlier in the period when computers were still shrouded in a degree of mystery, also found in computer dating a concerning sign of modern life, in which delicate social matters had been brought within the control of machines, and anonymity had spread to both the form and function of modern dating.²⁰ In 1970, Jill Tweedie wrote in *The Guardian*, in an article headlined 'Stick that in your data dating program': 'Given this unromantic view of life, I've watched with astonishment the [way] the computer has moved into the [realm] of love.'²¹ Meanwhile, a researcher at the University of Kent warned of the dangers of a society that allowed computers to make matches for them: 'no one in the world knows what chemistry is at work when two people fall in love, least of all a machine.'²² As computers got smaller and became household goods, 'dating by machine' lost its novelty and its dystopian wonder, but Dateline's economies of scale and quasi-industrial matching function continued to provoke social analysis by turns concerned and positive.

I have suggested that anonymity signalled both positive and negative associations with 'modern' life, including both social freedoms and the sinister experience of a bad 'blind' date. There was, however, a sharper end of blind dating by lonely hearts ad or

¹⁹'A trans-Atlantic bridal broker', *The New York Times*, 10 March 1981. www.nytimes.com/1981/03/10/style/a-trans-atlantic-bridal-broker.html.

²⁰E.g. Michael Raban, *Soft City* (London: Fontana, 1974).

²¹'Stick that in your data dating program', *The Guardian*, 1 Dec 1970, p. 7.

²²'Danger when computer plays Cupid', *The Times*, 23 Aug 1973, p. 4.

dating agency in the form of real crime, and it was in the scrupulous reporting of lonely hearts criminality that newspapers built a narrative of sexual violence, disordered class interactions and preying criminality as strong as the more upbeat one of modern pragmatism, echoing the older narratives of sexual misdemeanor and violence discussed in the introduction.

The extent of the horror of what could happen when lonely hearts services brought together people from wildly different classes was made clear by the grisly murder of the GP Ann Mead in 1994, who was bludgeoned to death outside her home by a man she met through her *New Statesman* personal but was too embarrassed about to introduce to her friends. For *The Daily Mail*, this was cause for reflection not just about the ‘modern disease’ of alienation and anonymity but about the dangers of mixing with people lower down the social scale.

Even without the violent end to their relationship, anyone could have predicted that a highly-qualified doctor would be badly matched with a former civilian police worker with a record of marriage and relationship failures culminating in a thwarted attempt to enrol for a university degree at the age of 45.²³

Typically, the *Mail* saw a tale of social decline – specifically the death of hobbies – behind the fact that ‘women like Ann Mead are forced to go shopping for love in markets they would not normally consider.’ *The Times*’ conclusion was more measured. Ann Mead was very unlucky: ‘anyone who ventures into the world of blind dating and marriage bureaux should be prepared for disappointment and deception...[but not murder]’.

Escalating coverage of lonely hearts-related crime cemented the sense that using services to hunt for love was deadly dangerous as well as modern, and that these two were somehow linked. Out of 109 *Times* articles concerned with ‘lonely hearts’ in the 1990s, 23 reported on crime. By comparison, out of 48 in the 1980s, just four had a criminal hook. Crimes did not always occur on the blind date, but murderers were frequently found to have used lonely hearts services, particularly those engaged in gruesome sexual violence. The range of crimes connected to lonely hearts was bewildering, and mixed sexual criminality with class-bounding fraud. Within a three

²³‘Commentary on Ann Mead’, *The Daily Mail*, 7 July 1994, pp. 42-43.

month period in 1994, *The Times* reported on a gigolo who conned rich women through the small ads into buying race horses that he would then kill for insurance; the rape and murder of a '22-year old chambermaid' by a man 'now thought to have been met in the lonely hearts', a paedophile who found fellow paedophiles through personals, while letters to women found in national personals pages were found in the caravan in which a ten year old girl was raped.²⁴

Occasionally the tale of sexual violence was reversed, as in the case of the Austrian 'black widow', who killed five men she met in the personals; another Black Widow emerged in 2003, dubbed 'every man's nightmare'.²⁵ But in general, women were reported in connection to fraud rather than violent crime – for conning men, or in the case of the mostly female matchmakers, conning customers. Generally, women were tricksters and gold-diggers, while men were rapists and murderers.

Given that they pooled anonymous people desirous of a range of sexual and romantic outcomes, it is perhaps not surprising that dating services came across as dangerous, arrayed in all the problems that could be imagined in relation to the meeting of strangers of different classes and sexes, problems exacerbated in urban settings. The sense that the dating pool of possible matches was fluid and without boundaries, sometimes troublingly so, nurtured another dominant thread in representations of matchmaking. This stemmed from the fact that meeting strangers, and being a stranger, allowed for a flexibility in self-presentation that made self-reinvention and the expression of social aspiration easier. The media seemed to be tapping into this idea by circling around the tropes of exclusivity, professionalism and the entrepreneurial approach to romantic destiny that were enshrined in the new breed of introduction agencies. Thus as well as revealing the dangers of dating socially illegible people, media coverage of mediated dating also portrayed it as a means for achieving the socially and the emotionally

²⁴'Nine years in jail not enough, child molester tells judge', *The Times*, 6 Sep 1994, p. 6. Other examples include 'Sex attacker admits savage killing of mother and girl, 4' a story in which the victim of killer and rapist Robert Napper was 'found to have placed an ad in a lonely hearts column in local paper'; *The Times*, 10 Oct 1995, p. 3; and 'Lovelorn war veteran is fined for stalking', *The Times*, 22 Oct 1997, p. 3. The war veteran had 'met lover through lonely hearts' then harassed her with photographs. In 'babysitter burnt in acid attack on the wrong target', the perpetrator had arranged a date with two sisters he met in the personals, *The Times*, 3 March 1998, p. 3.

²⁵'This woman is every man's nightmare... They can sleep safe tonight knowing she has been taken off the streets', *The Times*, 16 Dec 2003, p. 1; 'Lonely hearts trickster – Black Widow', *The Daily Mirror*, 18 Aug 2000, p. 11.

modern self. This portrait of newly fluid social boundaries was cross-cut by older models of class, which brought to the fore concerns about respectability that echoed those that characterised the late 19th century matrimonial press.

Mediated dating and social status

Before turning to the patterning of ideas around social background in coverage of mediated dating, it is worth refreshing the links between explicit class categories and perceptions of matchmaking in Britain, and clarifying what I mean by class in this discussion.

Changing meanings of class in the 20th century have been linked to structural economic changes, particularly the decline of manufacturing and the manual working class, the rise in its place of service industries in which increasing numbers of women worked part-time, and the expansion of the arena of consumption. To take one of many overviews, Patrick Joyce has summarised these arguments and their implications in terms of ‘a movement from production to consumption as the new basis of structural divisions and unities in society’.²⁶ Resonating with the idea of taste as matchmaker, this interpretation foregrounds the importance of cultural signifiers, alliances and sympathies in modern romance, and helps explain the success of some mediated dating businesses, such as the personals in *Time Out* and *City Limits*. Crucially, Joyce’s overview also highlights the degree to which late 20th century treatments of class have been framed by notions of instability, and dominated by post-modern critiques of class based on the concept of decentred power in an era of consumerism, globalisation and transnational popular culture.²⁷ Class became more negotiable as the coordinates of identity moved away from the external (church, work, civic societies) towards the self.²⁸ These arguments contribute to a reading of class as a malleable category, rhetorically suggestive but ultimately unfixed. This reading is particularly suggestive in considering how commentators as well as matchmakers discussed the conditions in which modern romance was felt to take place, conditions that were increasingly and logically leading people towards a pragmatic, consumerist approach to courtship. It

²⁶Patrick Joyce (Ed.), *Class* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 3.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁸Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Sociology and Postmodernity’, in Joyce (Ed.), *Class*, pp. 74-83.

wasn't that romantic pragmatism was new: as Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher have shown, the 'sensible attitude towards life and love' characterised working class communities in the early-mid century, such as those in Lancashire mill towns.²⁹ This meant shunning cross-class relationships in favour of people with the 'same background, similar occupation and same interests'.³⁰ But new attitudes were appearing towards how one might treat partner-hunting as a modern consumer. If in 'space age' life, social identity and therefore destiny were becoming the responsibility of each individual, it made perfect sense, according to some observers, to treat the search for a partner as you might treat any other service. And, in these conditions, treating dating as a service that maximised options allowed one to think about romantic encounter as a means for exploring individual social potential no longer bounded by the old fixities of occupational class or even race. One woman who had found two husbands through the lonely hearts pages of what appears to have been *Singles* was invited to share her experience in *The Independent*. Her account fit the more experimental frame of personals rather than the agencies, and of her first husband she wrote, 'We were different generations, different races, different religions and from vastly different backgrounds, and it is hardly likely that we would have met any other way. I enjoyed a short but very happy marriage until my husband died suddenly.'³¹

On the level of language, too, class worked flexibly and suggestively: used in different ways and used to suit different purposes, from forming a good slogan for an advert ('*your* type of person') to a means for setting the tone of a report in the *Times* to providing a simple descriptor in thorough accounts by chroniclers of the industry John Cockburn, Linda Sonntag and Colette Sinclair. In fact, 'class' was not necessarily mentioned, with markers of professional or lifestyle spending habits and discernment such as references to cars, leisure pursuits, geography, terms such as 'smart set' and, particularly from the 1980s onwards, many references to wine and Mediterranean food appearing instead.³² *The Times* wrote about a woman whose clients 'pay £6,000 a year

²⁹Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 191.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹'Be flexible and friendly – and don't give up', *The Independent*, 10 July 1993, p. 41.

³²Some of these new vocabularies were enshrined in Ann Barr and Peter York's best-selling *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook: The First Guide To What Really Matters In Life* (London: Ebury, 1984) and in Peter York's more scholarly treatment of subcultures, including those of the new and old wealthy, *Style Wars* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983).

to meet the right people.³³ Virginia Charles, founder of the expensive Farrar Grey agency, told *The Times* too about how people no longer met in supermarkets but in the auction rooms of Christie's and Sotheby's.³⁴ Yet in tracking the way social and professional hierarchies appeared in representations of mediated dating in Britain at this time, I acknowledge David Cannadine's insistence that class should not be treated as so unfixed or subject to varying approaches that it ceases to be 'essential to a proper understanding of...Britain'.³⁵ Indeed, by tracking back in time, we see some of the ways that more fixed understandings of class intersected with mediated courtship. A brief analysis of these will help foreground some of the key flashpoints associated with mediated dating in the late 20th century.

Since the advent of the matrimonial agencies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, observers had been struck – both positively and negatively – by the potential of commercial, secular mediated matchmaking to create socially incongruous couples. As suggested earlier, some reformers interested in eugenic solutions to social ills saw the small ads as a salutary means for cutting across class barriers and heeding the healthier sex instinct in mating choice. But as discussed, the bulk of concern about the matrimonial market related to the class dimension of advertising for a spouse. The growing matrimonial press was seen as increasingly catering to a dreary lower middle class of clerks, socially lost in growing cities, while also destabilising assumptions about social norms in which people courted and married people of the same class. The clerk class was mocked for taking a mercenary approach to the marriage market, as well as for aping a version of the upper class Season. Sketches of the matrimonial press offered an opportunity to critique the centrality of economics in the marriages of the gentry too.³⁶

Despite instances of upper class spouse advertising in fashionable newspapers, the gentry was associated with networks of sociability and ritualised opportunities for mixing. Meanwhile, working class communities continued to stage the 'bunny run' or 'monkey parade' – whereby young people met each other in public outings in the streets

³³'Playing Cupid to the upper classes – Interview', *The Times*, 25 June 1998, p. 23.

³⁴'Flirty ways to find a lover – Valentine', *The Times*, 12 Feb 1994, p. 3.

³⁵David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 2.

³⁶Cocks, 'Harry Cocks (2013)', 'The Cost of Marriage and the Matrimonial Agency in Late Victorian Britain', *Social History*, 38 (1), pp. 66-88: 175.

– until the 1960s.³⁷ The result was that matrimonial agencies or marriage bureaux, as we saw with some of the class-conscious advertisements in the *London Weekly Advertiser*, continued to serve members of the lower middle or working classes who found themselves afloat, either through romantic abandonment or through the vicissitudes of modern labour patterns. The 1970s were a decade of sharp growth in the British dating industry, but it was still the age of marriage bureaux like Ivy Gibson and Ida Reynolds, with more emphasis on processing large numbers of marriage hopefuls than on class exclusivity. Through the 1970s, the association between matchmaking and the lower middle classes remained strong. Thus the wording of *The Daily Mail*'s headline about the founder of the Middle Class Association: 'Middle class man seeks 50 lonely hearts', was revealing, exploiting a sense of contrast between the subject and actor – in fact, the man was advertising to create 'an incredible social document' as well as to find love.³⁸ Even for Heather Jenner, the upper class founder of the most famous of mid-century marriage bureaux, the approach to class was flexible. Respectability and seriousness of intent mattered more than exclusivity of social category. Only the 'very peculiar', the too young and the too old would be turned away.³⁹ A Pathé film of Heather Jenner and her associate Mary Oliver in action in 1939 focused on the successful matching of 'the perfect secretary', while the man's occupation remained unmentioned.⁴⁰

But as discussed in the previous section, the 1980s saw a shift in the deployment of social status, as marriage bureaux remodelled themselves as 'introduction agencies'. Despite being more preoccupied with social elitism than the bureaux, these agencies were actually mining newly flexible social territory. New businesses such as Hedi Fisher, Sara Eden, The County Register and Drawing Down the Moon forged new industry norms with vocabularies of exclusivity – 'bespoke' and 'tailored' introductions were promised, catering to 'professionals'; 'your type of person' whether that was 'town or country'. But was this about class? The idea that 'people from different classes simply don't mix' was rooted, even for Balfour, in a reading of a professional landscape in which media and creative jobs had proliferated, rather than in any idea of hereditary

³⁷ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), pp. 102–8; Jacqueline Sarsby, *Missuses and Mouldrunners: An Oral History of Women Pottery Workers at Work and at Home* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), pp. 71–5.

³⁸ 'Middle class man seeks 50 lonely hearts', *The Daily Mail*, 23 Nov 1977, p. 19.

³⁹ 'Finding the right partner', *The Guardian*, 12 Nov 1969, p. 9.

⁴⁰ 'Marriage Bureau', 1939, British Pathé, www.britishpathe.com/video/marriage-bureau-1.

destiny that was impervious to ambition – Balfour herself was from a working class family in Ireland and reinvented herself in London as a model and the future wife of a university professor. The veneer of social hierarchism that lay behind agency claims of ‘exclusivity’ was shored up by the media, whose own portrait of the glamour, speed and riches of the post-industrial, deregulated workplace in the 1980s and 1990s matched that of Balfour and her competitors’ marketing materials. Indeed, newspapers frequently invited Mary Balfour, Penrose Halson and Heather Heber Percy of The County Register to comment on the situation for the 1980s and 1990s career woman and the predicament for the busy but still traditional male.⁴¹ This kind of commentary affirmed the professionalised, affluent image of the new dating landscape, while the idea that women’s growing share of the workplace and of rights in general had fostered sexual and romantic discord appeared to fascinate editors and producers.⁴² Heber Percy recalled ‘a huge amount of very positive publicity’ when she launched The County Register in 1984, including interviews with Jeremy Paxman and Esther Rantzen.⁴³

‘Class’ was used by some in a more orthodox way as a lens for reading the growth of mediated dating, and the social realities this growth suggested. *The Daily Mail* – whose readership was ‘popular’, mostly working or lower middle class – portrayed introduction agencies as services for the well-heeled.⁴⁴ It described a video dating service’s clientele as attracting some ‘stable, middle class and fairly well off’ clients. The dating entrepreneur himself was quoted saying, with striking specificity: ‘We are catering exclusively for the middle classes, people who live comfortably in places like Bromley, Surbiton and Teddington’.⁴⁵ Tabloids took less interest in the dating industry than broadsheets or *The Mail*. Those stories that were selected for the tabloid readership

⁴¹Featuring Mary Balfour: ‘Why are we single?’, *The Independent on Sunday*, 10 Oct 1993, p. 21, and ‘FIT and paying her way, the 90s woman’, *The Daily Mail*, 9 Sep 1998, p. 30; for articles featuring Penrose Halson, see, e.g. *The Daily Mail*, ‘Four weddings and a bureau’, 6 Feb 1999, pp. 12-13.

⁴²Anna Gough Yates, *Understanding Women’s Magazines: Publishing, Markets and Readerships* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 95-118; Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 19-61. Many of these busy singles were women, particularly ‘career girls’, and many were divorced women. For women’s role in increasing divorce, see Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Wellbeing in the United States and Britain Since 1950* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 270-356. It appeared that divorced women formed a larger part of personals advertising than divorced men. According to Pauline Chandler, spokeswoman for *Singles*, 53 per cent of female readers were divorced compared to 29 per cent of men, ‘Dear lonely heart: *Femail*’s sociological survey into the thousands of courageous people looking for love among the small ads’, *The Daily Mail*, 12 Jan 1988, pp. 18-19.

⁴³Interview with ZS, 18 March 2015, London.

⁴⁴Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, p. 20.

⁴⁵‘Romeo and Video! New dating firm puts clients on camera’, *The Daily Mail*, 29 April 1982, p. 21.

were also explicitly interested in class, but in a different, more polarising way. Thus in *The Daily Mirror*, there was indignation regarding a Hartlepool lonely hearts club ‘suffering from men on the dole demanding “five-star brides” – “a well-paid job, their own home, sex appeal, kitchen skills – and be lovable with it”’.⁴⁶ There was an interesting regional angle too, as it was reported that the matchmaker found the local men so dastardly that ‘she is putting women aged between 30 and 40 in touch with males in London – 247 miles away’. *The Mirror* also reported with gleeful explicitness on the class hierarchy suggested by Heather Heber Percy’s agency, The County Register, with the headline ‘Posh splice: The woman who match-makes for the upper classes’.⁴⁷

Inasmuch as tripartite class categories were relevant, mediated dating provided a prime opportunity for media outlets to rehearse the spending power and affluent industriousness of the new ‘middle’ class, a group whose aspirationalism had emerged as a key feature of the 1970s and 1980s, in domains from gentrifying houses to appetites demanding a new crop of fancy restaurants.⁴⁸ A typical *Times* article on the industry in the 1980s ran like this:

Business is booming, one matchmaker suggests, because people are more used to using service industries in other areas of their lives and expect instant results. Most of the leading companies say their clients are usually white middle class professionals aged between 30 and 45.⁴⁹

Such articles helped the matchmakers by contributing to the image of the new dating industry as a new middle class domain for an age group decreasingly siphoned off in traditional families and ever more successful at work. Of the coterie of matchmakers favoured for quotes by *The Times*, most were based in London W1, bolstering the development of the upmarket, metropolitan image.⁵⁰ By the 1990s, Mary Balfour

⁴⁶Loves comes last as the men on the dole go hunting for a bride, *The Daily Mirror*, 19 Oct 1971, p. 9.

⁴⁷*The Daily Mirror*, 23 Jul 1998, p. 33.

⁴⁸On gentrification, see Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, p. 340; Joe Moran (2007), ‘Early Cultures of Gentrification, 1955-1980’, *Journal of Urban History*, 34 (1), pp. 101-121. On restaurants, see Michael Elliott, *Heartbeat London: The Anatomy of a Supercity* (London: Firethorn, 1986), pp. 142-145. On the ‘new’ affluent types of the 1980s, including those in artistic, media and financial industries, see Andy Beckett, *Promised You A Miracle: Why 1980-82 Made Modern Britain* (London: Penguin, 2015), especially prologue, and Peter York, *Style Wars*.

⁴⁹‘Dating with danger?’, *The Times*, 3 Feb 1989, p. 21.

⁵⁰E.g. Select Friends, Heather Jenner, Katharine Allan and Helena International.

explicitly identified her agency, Drawing Down the Moon, with a *Times* readership and focussed her advertising there.⁵¹

Superficially, *The Times* seemed to identify itself as a naturally interested observer of the rise of the well-heeled agency because of its own affluent and educated readership. Yet the newspaper's increasingly frequent first-person explorations of these agencies sometimes served to puncture rather than uphold agency claims about social elitism. When one journalist tried out Dinner Dates, run by a matchmaker whose 'product is professional, eligible men', the mismatch was clear.⁵² The agency provided 'the 1990s man who has everything. Everything except a mate'. She noted that those at the expensive dinner were a professional motorist, a doctor, an interior designer and a marine engineer, but the journalist concluded on a negative note. 'Paul offered me a lift home in his Porsche. In the world beyond our windscreen, a teenage couple slung arms clumsily around each other's jackets...I wondered why we had to dress up and pay £75 for the most natural human encounter of boy meets girl'. In stories such as these, *The Times* asserted the difference between the real meaning of upper middle class (it) and that of the matchmaking business and what could be seen as its dupes, willing to pay £75 for a basic human encounter.

Most coverage, however, was actually suggestive of the *flexibility* of what it meant to be an 'exclusive' agency customer in modern Britain. Being 'exclusive', particularly if you were a man, was attainable through aspirationalism, ambition, careerism – all within the individual's control (as Colette Sinclair's account makes clear, discussed in the next chapter, this could play out very differently for women).⁵³ Some newspapers were also interested in how the upper crust, both hereditary and professional, were grappling with contemporary conditions, but even here, language referring to social brackets was rooted in the individual's work ethic so that potential dates (men or women) become synonymous with their jobs. The result was an American-influenced patter. For instance, the American owner of Dinner Dates, was quoted in *The Times* saying: 'I've got a motor racing driver just your type. I've got a guy who imports Italian wine. I've

⁵¹Interview, London, 14 Oct 2014.

⁵²'Only the lonely and rich', *The Times*, 8 Aug 1990, p. 16.

⁵³For resonances with Thatcher's rhetoric about class, see Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 171-180 and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Jon Lawrence, 'Margaret Thatcher and the decline of class politics', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), pp. 132-148.

got accountants. I've got terrific gentlemen'.⁵⁴ Two years later, William Cash reported from LA on a new phone-dating service, quoting matchmaker Nereda Gibbs discussing her clients: 'They are mainly doctors, Hollywood producers, lawyers and even judges who simply don't have the time to spend dating dozens of different people each week.'⁵⁵ And in an extended meditation on the role of dating agencies in modern British life, *The Guardian* mused that an aging, richer population would ensure that mediated dating would lose its stigma and 'will no longer be regarded as a final attempt for emotional also-rans but as an absolute necessity for those too busy to organise their own social lives.' The emphasis on profession and wealth had become a key motif in British dating discourse.

Social and professional status was suggestive territory for exploring what it meant to look for intimacy within a patina of 'modern' trends and norms, and particularly the increasingly porous boundaries between professional and personal life. This was not necessarily a preoccupation with class in a clearly defined way. Rather, modern life seemed to mean a new orientation towards work, a greater consciousness — sometimes ostentatiously so — of time and time-poverty, and to provide a new set of tools for reading, and making sense of, potential matches. These were linked to new gradations of taste and experience emerging from consumerism, 'lifestyle' and the kinds of cultural passporting enabled by publications such as *Time Out*. But it was the image of the 1980s and 1990s professional that prompted the most widespread questioning of singles' relational capacity. New ways and metrics of approaching relationships were required, of which exclusivity seemed the most appropriate (and flattering) for people who had refigured their romantic isolation as a function of busyness and success rather than loneliness and need.

A sexual gulf? Dating as antagonistic encounter

The success or failure of courtship depends partly on the satisfaction of certain expectations about masculinity or femininity.⁵⁶ In the final part of this chapter, I want to turn to a third flashpoint: sexual acrimony and the pervasive idea that men and women

⁵⁴'Only the lonely and rich', *The Times*, 8 Aug 1990, p. 16.

⁵⁵'Life and Times: How to ring changes in your love life', *The Times*, 7 Feb 1992, p. 5.

⁵⁶Sreznker and Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*, p. 117.

were brought into an increasingly antagonistic relationship by dating. Returning to Scott's framework, this section reviews how the gendered relationality underpinning the quest for intimacy was seen as having been put under strain by women's changing status to the extent that romance and any older certainties associated with it were in danger of being fatally undermined. Tracing out this motif in matchmaking coverage helps illuminate the contradictions in understandings of women's advancement. 'Women's lib' was presented as a done deal while also decried or depicted as the main source of social chaos by a variety of voices that showed just how contested the goals and language of feminism still were into the 1990s.⁵⁷ The following analysis therefore engages with two key themes in the historiography of gender in the period: the first points to an end to 'mutuality' and the fostering of a 'sex war' by women's liberation; the second suggests that increasingly equitable sexual relationships pursued in a context of spreading therapeutic vocabularies and emotional skills meant that men and women were getting on better than was possible before the advent of feminism or permissiveness.⁵⁸ Both arguments informed understandings of mediated matchmaking, but the picture that emerged in British media coverage matched the first more than the second. What it really meant for men and women to be on an equal footing, and how such equitability was valued and articulated, emerges in the testimonies of the next chapter.

The explicitness involved in the negotiation of gender in mediated dating raised specific questions for onlookers. Had the institution of marriage changed to accommodate the new 'career woman' written about so much in the 1980s? Who exactly was the 'new man', and how did he fit with traditional romantic goals?⁵⁹ What did changing archetypes of gender mean for accountability and chivalry – often parsed in terms of who bore the financial burden – that had traditionally been expected in courtship?

⁵⁷In conservative publications such as *Singles* and *The Daily Mail*, 'women's lib' was often presented as having had ubiquitous success.

⁵⁸TV journalist Anna Ford observed: 'the evidence seems to be that the average man has been very little affected by feminism, and when he has, he feels varying degrees of antagonism'. *Men: A Documentary* (London: Corgi, 1986), p. 257. Improvement in the quality of sexual relationships argued prominently by Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, and Jeffrey Weeks, esp. *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁵⁹Ford, *Men*.

But mediated matchmaking was increasingly seen as a woman's issue. Newspapers stressed data relating to soaring numbers of single career women or the later age at which they were having babies.⁶⁰ A number of high-profile books and television shows about single women and dating gave the media a prolonged opportunity to discuss the intersections between contemporary woman, feminism and the realities of the dating landscape. By 2000, even the newspaper most attuned to sexism, *The Guardian*, agreed that careerist young women were the most likely to be single and lonely. With three times the number of singles in Britain since 1970, 'working women under 35 make up the biggest growth area in people joining matchmaking agencies, dinner groups and singles parties.'⁶¹ Women were now at the discursive frontline of what was sometimes seen as the decline in social order caused by, among other social changes, feminism. As Susan Faludi demonstrated in *Backlash*, there had since the 1980s been a growing inclination to locate the need for dating agencies in a panoply of social problems caused by women's liberation.⁶² Dating discourse, she argued, thrummed with 'myths' – including the idea of a man-shortage – that blamed feminism 'for making women miserable'.⁶³ Janice Winship has discussed the articles in women's glossies (of which only *Cosmopolitan* identified with the feminist movement) and men's magazines that implied there was a man-shortage, along with the idea that men were now too afraid to approach women, and at any rate were commitment-phobic. With its centre-right politics and dedicated interest in the fortunes of Britain's solos, *Singles* also weighed in on the results of feminism on dating. Although its analysis varied, it usually offered a sympathetic reading of what it saw as men's plight in the post-feminist dating domain. One typical article, 'Pity the single male', reasoned that 'In a society that is screaming about sexual discrimination (always against women)' single men's suffering were 'sorely overlooked'.⁶⁴ And because of women's increasing financial success, it was regularly emphasised that 'Men feel resentful...' at having to buy them drinks and dinner.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Faludi, *Backlash*; for the centrality to the British press of a more overt form of biological determinism, see discussion of the pin-up in Bingham, *Family Newspapers*, esp. p. 204.

⁶¹'Our eyes met across a small column...' From small ads to agencies, dating is big business these days – and young women are its keenest customers. Raekha Prasad investigates modern matchmaking', *The Guardian*, 31 Jan 2000, p. B6.

⁶²Faludi, *Backlash*, pp. 89-125.

⁶³Ibid., p. 8.

⁶⁴*Singles*, 21 (March 1978), p. 13.

⁶⁵*Singles*, 47 (April 1981), p. 25.

If the effects of feminism on gender dynamics attracted a great deal of comment in the wake of the launch of Women's Liberation in 1970, the assumed polarity between the 'new woman' and her still-traditional male counterpart in the dating game crystallised in the 1980s and continued to inform analysis in the 1990s. In her memoir *Happily Ever After: How To Meet Your Match* (1998), Penrose Halson explicitly blamed feminism for making women miserable. One of her most prominent stories was that of Julia, an extremely successful professional woman who entered Halson's office with poise and elegance, only to crumple and cry.⁶⁶ She'd spent her 30th birthday alone eating an omelette after working late. She wanted a man and a family but had married her desk instead. This woman's name was Julia and from then on Halson categorised her clients into 'Julias' versus those with more pronounced wifely instincts. 'In 1986 my most highly paid thirty-something woman client earned £25,000. In 1998 the figure was £250,000 plus bonus', Halson wrote, followed by the story of a man who found that modern women 'think flirting is a dirty word' and flowers an insult. 'Small wonder that men may fear they're becoming redundant, or are going out of fashion,' she concluded.⁶⁷ Hedi Fisher, of the upper crust London agency by the same name, also put the apparent rise of the career woman at the centre of her memoir of matchmaking over the years.⁶⁸

The Daily Mail led the newspaper dating backlash, and featured a number of disillusioned women and concerned onlookers. In an article called 'The new spinsters [in caps]: Are men afraid of these women?'⁶⁹ One interviewee confessed: 'The preliminaries of dating remind me of a job interview. After a long day at work, I don't want to bother'. A Relate counsellor provided analysis of this woman's issue, suggesting that single women had unfortunately lost the ability to love at all: they are 'not so much having problems within a relationship as having a problem establishing any relationship'. In another report, *The Daily Mail* interviewed participants in the six-part Carlton TV documentary *Singles*.⁷⁰ One female participant, Denise, said: 'I think this programme is a sign of the 1990s, which is why I decided to go on it. A lot of

⁶⁶Penrose Halson, *Happily Ever After: How To Meet Your Match* (London: Pan, 1999).

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁸Hedi Fisher, *Matchmaker, Matchmaker* (London: Book-Line, 1993).

⁶⁹*The Daily Mail*, 26 March 1992, pp. 24-25.

⁷⁰'A Singular Quest for Happiness: How the mating game has become the bitter obsession of the Nineties', *The Daily Mail*, 7 April 1993, pp. 18-19.

professional women in my age group have become quite independent and find it difficult to have a relationship'. Another, Monica, had clearly absorbed the image of a spinster dying alone among cats: 'I honestly felt I was scraping the bottom of the barrel going to a dating agency. To go in there was a complete disaster. But it is desperate being single at my age. I get pangs of panic that I am going to end up on my own...'. Perhaps more tellingly, ITV's *The Truth About Women*, aired five years later and, according to cultural critic, lecturer and documentary film-maker Victoria Mappelbeck was 'full of "lifestyle soundbites and caricature" that 'match perfectly' those of [*Bridget Jones*]' scored an impressive eight million viewers.⁷¹

The women's paradox of miserable liberation was identified and critiqued by Mappelbeck in an extended report for *The Guardian*, with a depth that merits dwelling on it here. Mappelbeck saw the positioning of women as failed bodies, condemned to loneliness and childlessness through their own careerism, as central to dating discourse in the 1990s. For her, programmes like the BBC's *Real Women* located the "'realness' of women...in their pain. These 'real women' were tough and witty in the face of "having a hard time of it"". Such portrayals were partly a backlash to feminism and partly a 'spectacle of angst' made possible by a new confessional zeal in the presentation of sex and relationships. Princess Diana was 'a Bridget Jones in reverse...her dating crisis became her trademark; she became the patron saint of the rejected'. The media's own dynamics of thrusting circularity played a major role in perpetrating what Mappelbeck called the 'career woman can't get a boyfriend panic' formula. Nick Fraser, the commissioning editor of BBC2's *Storyville*, confirmed that the 'relationship breakdown epidemic' was largely a media obsession with novelty, even if that novelty was favoured for its perceived fit with a more general national mood. Speaking to Mappelbeck, Fraser said: 'Documentaries feed into drama, and drama feeds back into the documentaries. It's on a loop. The medium just recycles itself...Commissioners are now looking at a lot of this stuff. It goes with the perceived 'newness' of Blair's Britain.'⁷²

⁷¹Victoria Mapplebeck, 'Bridget Jones: now all over TV: Helen Fielding's book has a lot to answer for...soon you won't be able to switch on without seeing a thirty something confessing all in a soap doc', *The Guardian*, 23 Mar 1998, p. C10.

⁷²Ibid.

The 1990s closed with a gender-polarised idea of how dating might fit the truly modern man or woman's life. The hunt for 'the one', however, remained a quest associated with women in their late 30s who were poised between the joys of independence and affluence, and the miseries of counteracting biological destiny. What that hunt might look like went global thanks to *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the quartet of *Sex and the City*, which debuted on Channel 4 in 1998. Dating and relationships had become commercial gold.

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This chapter has analysed the representational themes that framed and sometimes promoted the dating industry's development, suggesting that matchmaking coverage operated as a kind of proxy for a broader process of assessing shifts in social identity, romantic aspiration and gender. The flashpoints discussed in this chapter concerned the anonymity and social illegibility of potential dates, the instability and flexibility of social identity, and the emergence of competing sexual agendas. Taken together, these flashpoints return us to a key argument of this thesis: that the period after 1970 saw the development and refinement of a new emotional arsenal for use not only in managing expectations and rejection but in converting rejection into a productive, pro-active response. For underpinning each flashpoint was the awareness that failure rather than success was the more likely outcome of taking a punt on a blind dating service. In fact, according to the 1983 *Which?* report, the only way to approach such services was 'to treat it as a gamble, don't expect to win and if hearts come up trumps, then congratulations.'⁷³

Dating services seemed to be constantly refining their offering, catering to specific needs, wants and types. Whether or not this meant their success rates improved as the industry matured in the 1990s is unclear. But the attitude to failure and success changed, with a paradigm emerging that put the onus on customers to use failure as a signal to work harder at success: how this played out comes to the fore in the analysis of singles' testimonies in the next and final chapter. Romantic failure was, perhaps, the fault of the agency or the unresponsive people in the lonely hearts pages. But it was also portrayed

⁷³*Which?* Aug 1983, p. 362.

as a measure of how much labour – emotional, financial and administrative – the single was prepared to invest. As we saw at the close of Chapter One, the approach to dating in the 1980s and 1990s seemed geared towards ‘success’ in terms that required business-style management of the process, shrewd calculation and finely honed, aspirational taste.⁷⁴ Books, articles and television programmes all marked how dating culture had shifted since the 1970s by emphasising daters’ use of the same terms they would use in choosing a car or other luxury good. Market-oriented language was used in a variety of ways, with different degrees of knowingness, and with different implications for the malleability and meaning of an individual’s position in the social strata. But as well as encouraging a flexible, agentic approach to romantic destiny, this language also put pressure on singles to approach loneliness with an entrepreneurial spirit (not a downbeat one) and a ‘how-to’/‘can do’ attitude. People could and perhaps should ‘learn’ how to improve their chances, to play the game better and to market themselves. In other words, to shepherd their own destinies and emotional lives; to ‘take control’, a formulation used repeatedly by case studies whose extended testimonies appeared in John Cockburn’s *Lonely Hearts*.

The next chapter explores in more detail what it felt like to bring romantic fantasy into collision with flesh and blood lonely hearts, and – by no means always negatively – to experience the self as an object in a trade-fair of vital statistics and first impressions.

⁷⁴See also Strimpel, *The Man Diet: One Woman’s Quest to End Bad Romance* (London: Harper Collins, 2013).

Chapter Four: Mediated daters and the experience of matchmaking

‘Every single man I met lied to me’.¹ For Pen Fudge, 73 at the time of writing to me in response to my *Saga* ad, mediated dating – which she undertook in the 1980s and 1990s – was a disaster from beginning to end.² A keen lace-maker, the nadir for Fudge came when the jealousy of a man she met in the ‘small ads’ led to him eating – physically ingesting – the lace motif she was working on at the time. ‘He was telling me that now I would always be a part of him! Absolute madness.’ For Fudge, the men she met through mediated dating demonstrated just how sharply sexual agendas could clash. Her experience was one in which far from acting as a palliative for sexual difference, mediated romance set the stage for a gendered antagonism to which remaining single seemed preferable. The first person testimonies examined in this chapter reveal a spectrum of approaches and feelings about how gender played out in the context of mediated dating, with few quite as negative as Fudge’s. But as an example of miscommunication and sexual mistrust linked to the context of meeting, Fudge’s account offers an apt entry point to the evidence considered here.

This final chapter seeks to link the three main contentions of this thesis by focussing on the experience of mediated daters as they arranged, went on and interpreted the experience of their dates. In this thesis I have argued that a complex set of lags and tensions between sexual change on one hand and feelings and attitudes towards gender on the other lay at the heart of late 20th century heterosexual relational life. A second contention has been that as adults’ pre-marital phase expanded after the 1960s – with more people dating (or not dating) more people for longer before marrying or cohabiting – rejection and repetition became part of the courtship process. Singles developed, in tension with new psychological vocabularies of the self, an emotional pragmatism that accommodated the romantic failures that were becoming part of the instability of ‘modern’ relational life. The use of emotional self-management and armoury was particularly clear among customers of the matchmaking industry, since their dates were blind, arranged without prior confirmation of sexual chemistry, and

¹Personal correspondence, 12 Dec 2015.

²Pen Fudge is this interviewee’s real name: permission to use it was volunteered and confirmed by Ms Fudge over email, 5 May 2017.

therefore the most likely to disappoint or disconcert. Finally, I have maintained that in studying the context of romantic production, the conditions in which romance operated in late 20th century Britain take on new clarity. By revealing the workings of a market that traded in romantic desire, this chapter in particular demonstrates that, while the ‘logics of the market’ shaped the way many singles approached their romantic status, and attracted them to matchmaking services, the attainment of romantic authenticity was made less rather than more possible through commercial management and intervention. At the same time, the quest for ‘the one’ was tempered by a desire to experiment, to keep an open mind, and to use managerial pragmatism in achieving romantic ends. So far, I have approached these arguments through a variety of discursive and contextual lenses.

In turning to daters’ experience, however, this chapter substantiates the contentions of the thesis by showing how the tensions inherent in gender as a relational concept were played out in the ‘applied’ setting of courtship. Joan Scott has warned against assuming the ‘authority of experience’, since in doing so historians may simply replicate rather than question the binaries and structures that gave rise to the experience in the first place.³ Scott argues that historians of gender need to be particularly careful about the way they use the evidence of experience because of the embeddedness of the binaries at work in constructions of sexual difference and because the optic ‘experience’ can obscure the claims of competing, intersectional forces. In foregrounding experience, I aim not to reify gender differentials or obscure other factors such as class. However, given that gender differentials explicitly underpin heterosexual dating, my focus is on analysing how they operated rather than questioning the categories that gave rise to them. My goal in this chapter is instead to position experiences of mediated dating as key to my broader argument about how gender was thought, felt about and acted upon by individuals against a backdrop of the period’s sexual change. Moreover, although it attracts much public interest, dating itself is an intensely personal experience, with only two witnesses per date. The experience of those who went on mediated dates does confer ‘authority’ on the subject, since it is only through first person accounts that we can learn what actually happened in these encounters.

³Joan W. Scott (1991), ‘The Evidence of Experience’, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (4), pp. 773-797: 776.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. It begins with an exploration of why singles were attracted to mediated dating services, examining a set of external and internal motivations. I then move through to the hesitations, discomforts and evasions some felt about this way of meeting, emphasising how mediation could be turned into a distancing device that shored up a sense of the self as ‘normal’ in relation to other daters. The second part of this chapter pushes further the analysis of mediated dating as a form of consumption, with the tension between marketised romance and romantic feeling at the core of the discussion. I draw on the 1980s dating memoir by Colette Sinclair to probe a particularly extreme yet complex account of the struggle to integrate a programmatic, highly materialistic quest with the emotional realities of single, female selfhood. The third part of the chapter focuses on the date itself, treating it as a microscope revealing how bigger categories of gender were being performed in individual exchanges, and explaining how it developed into a ritual of consumption with the question of who had the financial upper hand front and centre. Deployed in closing, the case study of Mary makes particularly clear that the market forces that singles encountered and enacted on their dates could strain and test feelings about gender, and make it difficult or impossible for romantic atmosphere and feeling to emerge.

One of the challenges of this section has been to categorise a heterogeneous group of subjects. In the last chapter, I argued that in the 1980s and 1990s, matchmakers and the media deployed the concept of social status as flexible, rooted in professional ambition and rank rather than heredity. We saw that although matchmakers emphasised the exclusivity of their operation, in practice they adopted a relatively non-discriminatory process aimed at making sales. In this chapter, the idea of ‘exclusivity’ breaks down further in two main ways. First, when customers were attracted to the promises of agents to provide an elite service they usually came away particularly disappointed, and second, the social heterogeneity of all types of customer, from lonely heart to West End dating agency, was evident. Although class, geographical milieu (metropolitan settings vs. smaller towns) and gender constantly inflected perceptions and uses of dating services, advertisers were mixed in terms of social class, emotional and social adeptness and need, educational and professional background, but their approach to mediated dating did not map in any obvious way onto these categories. In Cockburn’s collection of 200 interviews of users of a single medium (personals), a faint pattern is discernible:

women appeared to have more social capital than the men, whose jobs – clerks, local government officers – often went with more lonely existences. Yet taking all the first-person sources together, it is clear that there was not one ‘type’ of mediated dater. However, as I have suggested, the individuality with which singles made sense of their romantic quest did not preclude the emergence of a set of clearly sexual agendas arising from the experience of romantic clienthood.

Mediated dating: motivations and usages

The promise of control

We have seen how purveyors of dating after 1970 loaded it with promise in marketing materials and press appearances. Agencies strained to present commercial matchmaking as the domain of the busy professional, sometimes specifying alignment with the middle, upper middle and occasionally the upper classes. Meanwhile, computer dating was an efficient solution for the lovelorn but respectable everyman and woman, with no awareness of ‘Clerks, shepherds, Peers of the Realm’ because ‘The Computer knows no class barrier, just people with a need.’⁴ And the branding of *Time Out* and *City Limits* shaped the image of their typical advertiser. All of them positioned themselves against the omniscient stigma surrounding singles services and emphasised a ‘modern’ form of sociality that was realistic, adventurous and an appropriate response to a couple-centric society.⁵

⁴Dateline advert, *Singles*, 18 (Nov 1978), p. 41.

⁵For the frequent use of ‘modern’ in describing the context and practices of mediated dating, as well as the behavior and attitudes of ‘post’-feminist women, see, e.g. *Singles*, 44 (Jan 1981), ‘Singular Topics’, p. 8; ‘Don’t think I am some old fashioned “fuddy duddy”, in fact I’m a modern 27 year old’, Letters, *ibid.*, 45 (Feb 1981), p. 5; ‘Old-fashioned values’, *ibid.*, 58 (March 1982), p. 6. ‘Modern’ is also used frequently by Linda Sonntag in *Finding the Love Of Your Life Using Dating Agencies and Small Ads* (London: Piccadilly, 1993), e.g. pp. 108-109, 118; and by John Cockburn in *Lonely Hearts: Love Among the Small Ads* (London: Guild, 1988), e.g. pp. 2, 5, 9, and 226. Of course, much of the historiography on 20th century love, sex and social change takes for granted the term ‘modernity’. For Alison Light, ‘modernity’ characterised a type of sexed conservatism visible after the First World War, while Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones take the era of sexual ‘modernity’ to mean the period after the publication of Marie Stopes’ *Married Love* in 1918, with Alex Comfort’s *The Joy of Sex* marking the completion of the transformation into a ‘modern’ paradigm. In *Modern Love*, Marcus Collins takes as ‘modern’ the whole 20th century, with the intellectual foment concerning ‘mutuality’ in the late 19th and early 20th century signifying its start. Langhamer cites the middle decades of the 20th century as a moment in which people became aware of how their relationships fit within a sense of ‘private modernity’. Examples of a wide literature on political modernity focused on the early to mid century include Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle (2013), ‘Humphrey Jennings, the Left and the Experience of Modernity in mid twentieth-century Britain’, *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (1), pp. 190-212, or for an overview see, e.g.

Unsurprisingly the ways in which mediated daters explained and contextualised their use of singles services did not necessarily map onto the categories put in place by dating businesses and by cultural sources. Nonetheless, taking control over intimate life was seen by both men and women as a freedom that should be exploited. While they had mixed feelings about using mediated dating, singles explained that they saw it as a rational response to circumstance, while the more extended interviews cast recourse to matchmaking services as a solution to internal and external pressures to find a relationship, a symbol of maturing and personal growth as well as an end in itself. By engaging with the idea of options and choice, the testimonies considered in the following section point back to Giddens' idea that expanded social options helped make sexual relationships more egalitarian, more 'plastic'.⁶ However, while the expansion of social options enshrined in the business model of mediated dating offered a pathway for thinking pro-actively about the social self, it did not appear to help smooth sexual relations. More useful, I think, for interpreting singles' approach to mediated dating is Rachel Bowlby's theorisation of the cultural meanings of modern shopping as a way of exerting 'freedom of choice'.⁷ Bowlby writes:

Instead of confinement, darkness, hidden controls, shopping in its positive guise appears as....the proud symbol of modern mobility. People are no longer restricted to their traditional horizons, whether geographical, social or psychological; consumer choice epitomizes their liberty to move away from old constrictions, to indulge the freedom of new desires and demands and to take on different identities as they wish.⁸

Building on this image of consumption in its 'positive guise', this section explores the degree to which paying for romantic aid allowed people to experience the multi-faceted, forward-looking freedoms of consumer status elucidated by Bowlby. As we will see, being a romantic 'shopper' offered daters a novel means for self-fashioning and enabled

Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (eds), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 2013); Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain, 1919-1970* (London: Palgrave, 2015), p. 2. Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 4. Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Atlantic, 2001).

⁶Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 2.

⁷Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (London: Faber, 2000), p. 3

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

them to both control their exposure to the sexual domain, and push back against the limitations of personal and social circumstances.

Romance has long been conceived in market metaphors; the economist Gary Becker's influential description of the 'marriage market' in 1974 enshrined the idea that people searching for partners deploy the economic principles of choice used in other markets.⁹ The way people negotiate with choice has also come to define a more recent sociology on love and courtship, further entrenching the conceptual similarities between shopping and dating. Thus Eva Illouz has theorised contemporary romance in terms of an 'architecture of choice' encouraging people to approach potential lovers as though at a buffet, the logics of consumerism problematically co-mingling with the demands of feeling.¹⁰ Her account foregrounds the importance of the *search* for dates, a new 'field' whose 'invisible but powerful marketplace of competing actors' had made it the most absorbingly complex part of the romance process.¹¹ The result, according to Illouz, was that dating – despite encapsulating all the freedoms of sexual modernity – had become defined by ambivalence.¹² These formulations offer a frame for considering the feelings singles experienced as they faced the explicitly marketised milieu of mediated dating. But whatever its emotional or psychological after-effects were, the desire to have 'options' was central to the decision for many to become customers. The attractions of paying for a service that offered choice were often discussed in gendered terms, linked, for instance, to understandings of 'modern' women's work. For one female Mass Observer, a dating agency was used 'to find myself partners to take to official dinners connected with my job'.¹³ Meanwhile Linda Sonntag, whose mediated dating manual was partly based on personal experience, framed the advantages of advertising by what she saw as the diminution of social choice caused by an ever-more 'fragmented' society in which women 'who are highly successful in their chosen professions' found themselves shorn of choice.¹⁴ And rising divorce rates had left another Mass Observer a 'single mother, and over 40 [with] no men in village'.¹⁵ Younger women also pushed

⁹Gary Becker (1973), 'A Theory of Marriage: Part I', *The Journal of Political Economy*, 81 (4), pp. 813-846.

¹⁰Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 59.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³Mass Observation Project (MOP from here on), Directive Replies (DR from here on), G226, Summer 2001.

¹⁴Sonntag, *Finding the Love*, page un-numbered (frontmatter) and p. 4.

¹⁵MOP, DR, R1227, Summer 2001.

back against lack of options: a student librarian at Wolverhampton Polytechnic lived in a ‘bedsit with girls in Ealing [and] had no way of meeting men’ and was persuaded by friends to try computer dating.¹⁶ For these women, the options that mediated dating collated and made available were seen as a key way of moving beyond limited social geographies.¹⁷

Beyond the professional sphere, daters – particularly (though not exclusively) those who lived in small towns – felt pressure to expand their ‘social circle’ as a way of enriching their lives as well as of meeting someone.¹⁸ One woman, 49 at the time of writing, joined a ‘pen-friend agency’ when she ‘realised that almost everyone I had ever dated came from my small south-western university’.¹⁹ Men also joined agencies in response to the limited options in their hometowns: one, born in 1963 and 38 at the time of writing in 2001, ‘joined a dating agency....I was living in a small town with a pretty limited social circle’.²⁰ More often, male MOP respondents explained their recourse to commercial solutions to romantic loneliness in terms of emotional and sexual want, aligning the decision with need rather than choice. One man, 72 and a retired chartered surveyor, reflected on his situation in the early 1970s, cognizant but locked out of ‘a new culture afoot...the Pill; a revolution in the publishing world about what was pornographic and a plethora of sexually oriented magazines’. He concluded that: ‘Something had to change in my life and I started to follow up contact advertisements’,

¹⁶Ibid., S1983.

¹⁷In her useful overview of the geographical literature linking space, sexuality and leisure, Cara Aitchison points out the dominance of queer, consumer and cultural themes (literature, film, street culture, body fashion). My subjects did not seem to experience their geographical situation as defined in these ways, however, so while I acknowledge its richness, my engagement with this body of work is limited at this juncture. Cara Aitchison (1999), ‘New cultural geographies: the spatiality of leisure, gender and sexuality’, *Leisure Studies*, 18 (1), pp. 19-39. For examples of work exploring how space shapes sexuality and vice versa, see David Bell and Gill Valentine (eds), *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995). There is a tenuous overlap between the geographical demands of arranging dates with themes in Rob Shields’ study of the locations in which specific sexual agendas have been pursued, ‘Dirty Weekends and the Carnival of Sex’, in *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 105-117. For historical treatments of gender (rather than sexuality) and space, see Claire Langhamer, *Women’s Leisure in England, 1920-1960* (Manchester: MUP, 2000) and Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), and for the historiography on sexuality and the city, see, e.g. Harry Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century* (London: IB Taurus, 2003) and Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-57* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁸MOP, DR, H2840, Summer 2001.

¹⁹Ibid., G2640.

²⁰Ibid., H2840.

resulting in the longed-for sexual initiation.²¹ A man who at thirty left college to begin work as a teacher ‘felt very much on the shelf’ and joined a Catholic introduction agency.²²

If men and women pursued mediated dating from within different emotional frameworks of need and control, the idea of ‘options’ was also gendered. For many, particularly women, ‘options’ could be as much about who they were trying to avoid as whom they were seeking because of safety issues, as well as complex, gendered expectations around finances. Some women who ‘found’ themselves single after a marriage or long relationship ended, joined agencies as a way of controlling their exposure to sexual partners (e.g. risky short term ‘affairs’ with married men) as well as a way of moving on.²³ For interviewee Millie, a 74-year old woman who met her third husband Michael (also interviewed) through Hedi Fisher, the agency was a refuge from predatory men, its female matchmaker imposing a reassuring order on sexualised male agendas.²⁴ Millie had found that ‘Every person I come into contact with wants to know whether I’ll go to bed with them...Men seemed to think, if you were a divorced woman, you were missing sex or whatever, and that’s all you were interested in’.²⁵ Millie paid £150 to join, ‘a lot of money’, but figured that ‘if someone was willing to pay that amount...’ then the chances are they would not be sexual aggressors. Safety was also a concern for my interviewee Lily, an academic journal editor aged 63, who started her mediated dating career with an agency when she was in her late 20s because ‘I felt that an agency would have much much more...probably safety...that there was somebody there that would help to filter out psychopaths’.²⁶

For women, the threat of sexual danger was built into mediated dating, and confirmed in the news reports discussed in Chapter Three, but in fact none of my female sources recalled being threatened by the men they met this way. Instead, other disappointing masculine behaviours came to the fore and shaped women’s thinking about how to approach singles services. Thus because agencies offered the personalised attention of a

²¹Ibid., B1509.

²²Ibid., B1989

²³Ibid., M1979.

²⁴Names of all interviewees apart from Pen Fudge have been changed.

²⁵Interview, 9 Feb 2016, London.

²⁶Interview, 19 Oct 2015, London.

matchmaker, and were expensive, singles turned to them as a refuge from disappointments encountered through other, less tailored channels. Mary signed up to an agency when she found that her single's holidays through the travel operator Solos weren't providing attractive options but rather 'guys who...I didn't see them as someone who I was going to spend the rest of my life, or any time at all with' – moreover, the company seemed to be increasingly catering to the 30s and 40s age range 'at the cost of older singles'.²⁷ For Michael, joining an agency seemed the most respectable means for taking his widower's life in hand. Both he and Millie had frequented dances in north London as a primary way of meeting people but by the 1990s 'they had all gone'. Hedi Fisher had a 'good name', with lots of Jewish clients, and the woman who interviewed him, a 'Mrs Joyce Zane', was 'good'. He remembered the interview as thorough and effective, fulfilling the brief he was prepared to pay for.

She 'went over the things in the questionnaire and probed a bit further'. For Millie, as we have seen, the agency signalled a stock of men with – above all – respectable intentions: 'I wanted someone not shorter than me, but I didn't care what they looked like' as long as they were 'honest', 'reliable', had 'all the good qualities'. The matchmaker advised her that, after two failed marriages with them, she should avoid Jewish men, because she was 'too down to earth'.²⁸

In allowing women to control the context in which their options were produced, mediated dating also offered a means for avoiding men who would drain their resources. In personal ads, this required clear syntax, which, in the case of *Singles* readers, was often flagged by men as a sign of shameless gold-digging. Their female counterparts had to explain forcefully why they were justified in doing so.

"Professional" man is stipulated in order that unwashed unshaven and part dressed yobs don't appear for meals and also to intimate that the advertiser would like to meet a male with a wider topic of conversation than football and bars,' wrote one woman. Further, she explained: 'The "successful" "solvent" etc. part of the vocabulary usually tells a story if you look a little further. It usually means they are sick to death of trying to live on a pittance...My ex-husband was so mean with his money...' ²⁹ Taking semantic precautions, another female *Singles* reader's advertisement tellingly requested

²⁷Interview, 16 Dec 2015, Essex.

²⁸Michael was Jewish. Millie didn't fit Michael's requirements either: she smoked and was (twice) divorced, yet Michael saw this as 'lucky' – part of his satisfaction with the whole process.

²⁹*Singles*, 18 (Nov 1978), p. 8.

that men ‘Read no further! Unless you are a good looking professional fella....’³⁰ The need to filter was extreme in Fudge’s experience, since ‘most’ of the men she met through the small ads

were not working and hadn’t for a long time yet they told me they had really good jobs when we talked on the phone. Several turned out to be married. Two were alcoholics, one had been in prison for a long time and finally one of them stole my car as he turned out to be a crack addict.³¹

For this reason she later turned to an agency (although this didn’t provide a happy solution either). Women also commented on the need to avoid the kinds of men who, in their 60s or even 70s were advertising for younger women with a view to ‘looking for a carer for their declining years’.³²

The concept of choice and options worked in two ways, then, for the mostly female singles discussed above: first, as a way of expanding social options in the context of demanding careers, single-sex or small-town environments, and second, as a means for controlling and filtering exposure to men who would take advantage financially or sexually. In the next section, I turn to another set of pragmatics, focussing on the traction these had with women’s testimonies in particular, and highlighting how mediated dating was used as an instrument of personal growth, as well as for the fulfilment of explicit relational and familial preferences and intentions. These could be articulated in a spirit of explicit self-assertion that some onlookers saw as a troubling by-product of feminism. On this score there are some intriguing insights to be gained from Arlie Hochschild’s analysis of late 20th century attitudes towards romance. The relationships expertise that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, argues Hochschild, circulated a ‘paradigm’ of instrumentalism that offered a ‘blend’ of feminism and ‘commercial spirit’.³³ Women in particular were coached to develop ‘an instrumental detachment’ enabling them to face men as non-needy equals, conversant in the emotional ‘coolness’ required of the self-aware, self-protecting and balanced partner.³⁴ While my subjects did not necessarily achieve (or strive for) detachment, Hochschild’s

³⁰*Singles*, 12 (May 1978) p. 45.

³¹Email correspondence.

³²MOP, DR, M1395, Summer 2001.

³³Arlie Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes From Home and Work* (University of California: Berkeley, 2003), p. 23.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 24; see also Illouz’s discussion of ‘therapeutic modes of self control’, in *Why Love Hurts*, p. 149.

analysis nonetheless anticipates the use by British singles in this period of mediated dating for non-romantic ends such as self-development and social or sexual experience.

How men perceived women's approach to matchmaking also invites attention. Elsewhere in her analysis, Hochschild suggests that feminism was used to legitimate the claims put forth in commercial dating and relationships advice. Here we see how – outside of the commercial sphere – men used feminism to *de*-legitimate women's approach to relationships, and what they saw as the disturbingly business-like nature of female singles' sexual approach. 'British women have got a very very gentle side to them I think,' noted the character Nick on the documentary *Singles*, 'but that is disappearing because of some of the more militant feminine thoughts that are going around society today...I'm not saying I disagree with feminism, but there's such a big deal made today by women, "oh I'm independent".' But, Nick wondered, 'What is independent really? How can you be independent – totally independent and have a loving relationship?' What exactly Nick had encountered as 'independence' remained unclear. Clearer was the sense that the women he was encountering were more interested in pursuing personal ends in a self-assertive fashion than in 'giving', and were therefore somehow representative of what he perceived to be feminism's destructive power.

A tool for personal growth

The Mass Observer who used computer dating when she was a trainee librarian found that: 'it was very good for me as I had to stop expecting Prince Charming to come along and lighten up a bit.' The idea that dating lots of people was 'good for' her marked her movement away from aloofly waiting for 'the one', towards the conviction that experience was a good in itself whatever the outcome.³⁵ Attitudes such as these gave

³⁵For links between self, growth and sexual encounter in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, see Matthew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), and Ben Mechen (2015) *Everyday Sex in 1970s Britain*, PhD thesis, UCL. For a feminist cultural studies perspective on how sexual, rather than romantic, experience became enshrined in British culture, see Angela McRobbie on the 'new sexual contract', *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), esp. pp. 83 and 84. For polemical analysis of female instrumentalisation of sexuality through inverse feminism, see Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010); for the American context, see Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2005), and more conservatively, Wendy Shalit, *Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

individual texture to the documentation of broader shifts in sexual behaviour discussed in Chapter One, and highlighted how courtship – no longer tethered to marriage as an end point – took on a complex gradation of purposes that related as much to questions of selfhood as to romantic commitment to someone else. Indeed in Cockburn's analysis of his 200 interviews with personals users, the use of dating for personal development, 'as part of the self-awareness movement', was a key part of their usage.³⁶ Linda Sonntag also captured the sense that the romantic experience on offer to mediated daters could, perhaps first and foremost, be seen as a valuable tool for self-development: 'Even if you don't meet anyone who changes your life, you will have changed your life yourself, by opening it up to new experience'.³⁷ The implication of this shift for women was marked: romantic experience was for the first time not something they needed to ration and avoid, but rather something that they could and should actively seek as an end in itself, reshaped as an instrument of self-realisation.

Among Cockburn's interviewees, both women and men admitted to 'seeing [in the columns] an instrument that enhances their love lives'.³⁸ First, however, Cockburn categorised singles as 'single girls looking for lovers', while men were 'bachelors on the search'; cross-gender categories included divorcees and widows (including 'divorcees looking for replacement wives') and 'affair seekers', 'sugar daddies' and 'toy boys'. Whereas some kind of sexual politics shaped many of the accounts considered in this thesis, Cockburn's study explicitly framed his investigation in terms of Women's Liberation and its effects, returning repeatedly to the idea of confusion over changing gender roles. Certainly, in his view, feminism structured his subjects' recourse to mediated dating:

a large proportion of single women advertising in the lonelyheart columns are independent and achieving women who have learned that they can influence, if not fully control, their lives and futures. Hence they go about their tasks of mate finding with the same kind of efficiency that they go about their careers....³⁹

Cockburn's female interviewees stressed the pressures of what they felt to be biology in terms that were both traditional but also redolent of the new technocratic romantic

³⁶Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 24.

³⁷Sonntag, *Finding the Love Of Your Life*, introduction, page not numbered.

³⁸Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 87.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 62.

vocabularies discussed in Chapter One. Thus Susan, who advertised in *Time Out* and *Singles* answering six adverts or letters a week, was searching for Mr Right. ‘I’m 31 now so I only have about seven childbearing years left. And I want at least two children’.⁴⁰ Like Sinclair, Susan had the listing style of the mediated dating habituée: the children ‘have to be with the right man...I need support and warmth and a caring relationship too. I want someone to love me and be here for me to love’.⁴¹

Commercial dating could also provide more than a tool for enhancing love life or personal development. For some, it offered an emotional emollient for restlessness and dissatisfaction more generally, becoming an internal rather than an external instrument embedded in the single’s wider psychological ecosystem. Thus one woman told how after she’d placed an advert for the first time:

I knew that I’d never be lonely ever again I get bored very easily, but I knew that however bored I got and however many people I would meet I could always turn to this resource. There are millions and millions of men and I never had any hesitation doing it.⁴²

Loneliness, a feeling imposed by circumstance, and an innate tendency to ‘get bored very easily’, were both shaped by ‘this resource’. But taken to extremes, the inward-facing instrumentalisation of romantic choice could create anxiety and a sense of being emotionally and psychologically shelled out rather than enriched. One of Cockburn’s female interviewees claimed to be addicted to lonely hearts advertising: ‘I tried something dramatic to stop myself doing it...I thought I would completely wipe out the past, kind of exorcise myself and that I would start to be a real person, not just a hollow shell that did this all the time.’⁴³ This account suggests that the realities of selfhood were not always able to keep pace with the modes of self-management implicated in being a ‘modern’ single. It is striking that for this woman, ‘the past’, normally taken to substantiate personhood, negated the person she wanted to be into the future. She makes this clear in her means of ‘exorcising’ the lonely hearts addiction, symbol of the emptied-out person: creating a bonfire and burning all her correspondence.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 74.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 74.

⁴²Ibid., p. 207.

⁴³Ibid., p. 231.

I want now to turn to two more in-depth examples of how mediated dating could be experienced not simply as a response to an ‘architecture of choice’, but as a carefully calibrated method of psychological self-management and maturation, historically embedded in a landscape of changing sexual norms and options.

For journal editor Lily, born 1953, the decision to deploy a commercial service and therefore take control was driven by a longing to gain independence, sexual confidence and experience. On her 30th birthday, in 1983 (‘it felt like I was becoming old and mature’) a male friend ‘paid for an ad in *City Limits*, I did the wording’.⁴⁴ That it was presented as a birthday present suggests how exciting it was, an innovative piece of social and personal manoeuvring brimming with options suited to the sexually liberated woman of 1970s London – albeit one that wanted a partner and children – rather than a last resort for the desperate. ‘I felt it was me taking charge, I felt I would like to have a committed partner and children...’ Lily’s *City Limits* ad did lead to her meeting her husband, with whom she had two daughters. But he eventually divorced her after he ‘got in touch with his homosexual side’ – whether or not this result caused Lily to reconsider the benefits of the medium of meeting was not clarified.

Prior to the *City Limits* advert, Lily had used a dating agency. The reasons she elucidated for this went deep into her childhood, to a mother who, she said, always undermined her academic ambitions, her parents’ miserable marriage, the sense of claustrophobia and failure associated with home life. After a period of being unwell, she had to sell her flat (on buying her own flat: ‘my parents said it was a great mistake’) and move home. Moving back in with her parents felt like an all-time low, conveyed in the disjointed wording of the recollection. ‘There was a sort of sense of gosh...I am really...many of my friendships were such that I wouldn’t have wanted to continue them...I had moved out of London and back into Hertfordshire and that was it really. That was why I did it really’. By ‘it’ she meant joining a dating agency, which seemed to represent a step back into adult life, a taking back of adult control. ‘It was very much... how am I going to get out of this...having come full circle, having had some adult life, ending up as a child again and I didn’t like it’. The choice of an agency was intuitive: more comfortable to her then than the more open-ended personals and

⁴⁴Interview, 19 Oct 2015, London.

Dateline because it offered a ‘safety’ net. Although the agency was technically a failure – she didn’t meet her match – it catalysed a kind of sexual maturity by bringing into relief the type of person Lily was not looking for, nor felt she was. In particular, it drew out what felt like irreconcilable differences between generations. ‘These men were very conventional, very conservative, in a sense, belonging to the kind of society, the kind of social habits that were pre-1968 and sexual revolution. They were too old for me’. By contrast, *City Limits* was ‘much more exciting and useful than the dating agency’ – it was also full of socialist politics that agreed with Lily’s self-image – the socialism ‘really came out’. The initial letters she exchanged with her future husband, a scholar of early modern Hindi, contained references to Chairman Mao. *City Limits*’ lonely hearts offered a classic example of a left-learning metropolitan milieu: more politically homogenous than *Time Out*’s, and contrasting sharply with the national *Singles*, *Private Eye* and the personals of regional papers. Left-leaning print culture enabled a form of romantic exploration that fit with Lily’s generational sense of being ‘modern’, and affirmed her political identity. The matchmaker’s clientele might have been too traditional for her, but Lily’s use of both mediums suggests that the psychological need for a sense of her own agency as a daughter and a woman underpinned her use of a singles’ service as much as the desire for a partner.

For Elaine, a mental health nurse who used Dateline before answering an advert in *Time Out*, third-party dating was also about expediting a romantic future that may otherwise have slipped away.⁴⁵ Although (as reviewed in Chapter One) the marriage age had risen since the early 1970s, and marriage rates were steadily dropping as cohabitation increased, the persistence of the monogamous heterosexual norm put pressure on Elaine. Turning 30 while single represented a watershed moment. ‘I remember working on the ward with the ward sisters, who were 30, perfectly nice women, they had just resigned themselves to living in rented flats, never going to marry. I thought, ok this is desperate measures’. And Dateline proposed an appealingly scientific method. Elsewhere, I have argued that the expansion of psychological expertise on one hand and new age ‘science’ on the other, helped carved out a historically-specific niche for Dateline.⁴⁶ Indeed, for Elaine, ‘I think perhaps in the 70s, if serendipity didn’t work, you

⁴⁵Interview, 13 April 2016, London.

⁴⁶Strimpel (2017), ‘Computer Dating in the 1970s: Dateline and the Making of the Modern British Single’, *Contemporary British History* (online). [dx.doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1280401](https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2017.1280401).

lived it and it didn't work, perhaps you were attracted to something scientific.' That 'something scientific' was the core of Dateline's marketing around 1980, while its claims to be class blind (whether 'peer of the realm' or humble shepherd, quote above), also attracted Elaine.

I knew about those dating agencies but I thought they were expensive and for upper middle class people.... They were too posh, for people who had been in Oxford and Cambridge. You need a level of confidence, you have to go and give a profile, you have to have something that can be introduced, and I think I didn't feel that.

Dateline seemed less intimidating. She 'saw the ads on the Tube' and signed up, feeling more comfortable with the heterogeneous array of potential matches Dateline offered than with the more exclusive outfits. Finally, for Elaine, like for Lily, the pursuit of intimacy through mediation reflected a desire to avoid the unhappy past of their parents' generation. In Elaine's terms it was a 'big thing, do not end up like your mother – do not go there – happiness does not lie there': in her mother's case, an unhappy marriage and an unwanted child produced out of social expectation ('I was unwanted').⁴⁷

The testimonies of a number of Mass Observers, Millie, Michael, Elaine and Lily present different versions of mediated dating as a profound way of exercising agency; for Elaine, it was a private ('desperate') but necessary measure, while for the others, singles services jumped out as the only solution to romantic isolation, and – whether or not they led to marriage – opened up valuable new perspectives on life and selfhood.

Hesitations, discomforts and the question of the natural

Singles used mediated matchmaking for a variety of pragmatic reasons, and the accounts of these considered so far paint a fairly positive picture. But as the analysis continues, the dissatisfactions, clashes and discomforts that could also accompany mediated matchmaking become more emphatic. Here I want to move from the reasons people did date this way to look in more depth at the discomfort that could be associated with using these services. Tracing unease about matchmaking, among both users and

⁴⁷For the classic account of the complexities of recapitulation and differentiation in mother-daughter relationships between the generations in this period, see Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape For a Good Woman: A Story of Two Women* (London: Virago, 1986).

non-users, brings us nearer to unpicking the key tension this thesis posits between the commercially revealed source of romantic production and the generation of romantic feeling itself. By the 1980s, consumption was, according to some scholars, ‘a whole way of life’, and as I have suggested, some of the language deployed by mediated daters was taken explicitly from the workplace and the market.⁴⁸ However, the testimonies considered below demonstrate the limits of how porous the ‘logics of the market’ actually were. Daters might have used marketised language to describe their approach, but their feelings were less amenable to such a framework, so that for many, the reconciliation of romantic clienthood with the constitution of a legitimate romantic setting did not appear to be possible. The following section is dedicated to probing this dissonance between the systematic and the authentic, and in doing so points to the complicated ways in which romantic feeling could be set against the unfurling of market processes.

Claire Langhamer, along with sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Arlie Hochschild, and Eva Illouz, have posited a key tension in 20th century courtship between pragmatism in partner-choice and ‘true’ love, or between ‘routine, labor, and calculation [as the] enemy of romance’ and the need for ‘regular applications of effort and skilful management’ in order to find and maintain a lasting relationship.⁴⁹ Applied to mediated dating, this tension was particularly noticeable, with singles acutely aware of the ways in which paying for a service and mediation by technology or matchmaker threatened to stifle proper romantic bonding. This sense was clear among both customers and those who hadn’t used services. A number of respondents cited a preference for more ‘natural’ ways of meeting, assumed to be more likely to elicit more ‘natural’ grades of romantic feeling. One Mass Observer put it succinctly: ‘I suppose dating agencies are alright for some people but I would prefer to meet someone in a more natural way in the ordinary course of events’.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption* *Cultures of Consumption: Commerce, Masculinities and Social Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 2.

⁴⁹Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 192.

⁵⁰MOP, DR, J1890, Summer 2001. For more examples of the language of the ‘natural’: love as something you ‘just know’, *ibid.*, W1457; are ‘hit’ by, *ibid.*, H276; of being like a ‘chemical reaction between two elements, acid + alkali = neutral’, *ibid.*, N2912; and a ‘smell’, *ibid.*, R860.

Love appeared, in this light, to be generally resistant to third-party matching. Another Mass Observer said she ‘never used a matchmaker or felt the arrogance to play matchmaker for anyone else. As a general rule I see relations and sexual relations as a private matter which is the business of no one else’.⁵¹ For her, intervention in intimate matters was a form of god-playing. Machines were no better: ‘I once used Dateline to find a partner’, noted one woman, ‘and quickly learned that computers can not think in abstracts, e.g. about a person’s personality.’⁵² The unnatural was not simply to do with the intervention of a third-party. It was also related to the apparently murky boundary between courtship and sex in dating services. Tellingly, a number of people who explained why they had avoided or never come into collision with a dating service seemed to think that dating services were a form of sexual service, eliding ‘escorts’ and matchmakers.⁵³ One observed agencies ‘Seem[ed] a good idea but asking for trouble’⁵⁴ while others noted with bemusement their friends’ experiences, emphasising their sexual nature, a facet that stood out particularly to the older respondents: ‘What she wanted was something extra,’ recalled one woman born in the 1920s of a married friend. ‘She got it’.⁵⁵ Sex, like commerce, was seen as an antithetical framework for the pursuit of true romantic bonds.

If some struggled to make sense of this ‘unnatural’ form of dating, and associated dating services with insalubrious or unrespectable strangers, then for others blind dating – in wrenching away social context – raised uncomfortable questions about the social value and standing of individuals. The stigma surrounding mediated dating was widespread, after all, and suggested that there was something wrong with people who had failed to meet people in the normal course of life. If ‘lonely hearts’ were thought to be for losers, then what did that make oneself as a customer? In wrestling with this question, some singles deployed complex manoeuvres to show that they were distanced from the process while participating in it. One extreme but revealing example of this approach was found in the account of a 42 year old man who described how he and his friends placed an ad in *NME* music magazine ‘for a laugh’.⁵⁶ This account is worth dwelling on because it shows the complexity of feelings deployed in responding to

⁵¹Ibid., B2917.

⁵²Ibid., D2824.

⁵³E.g. ibid., H1806 (male).

⁵⁴Ibid., G1416

⁵⁵Ibid., P2138.

⁵⁶Ibid., P2915.

stigma – in this case shame, the desire to prove social mastery and the impulse to sexual judgement.

Advertising in *NME* was ‘a laugh’ because ‘only really sad people do it’ and ‘what we wanted was the fun of getting letters back with photos of these women so we could laugh and sneer at their comments about themselves’. Acknowledging the malign spirit of their trick hints at a kind of confession, but the account remains distant, using the manoeuvre as a narrative device for self-distancing rather than for engagement with personal ads as a valid way of meeting. The narrator tells how ‘we were like little children’, making up the name of Mark Scott, ‘which we thought sounded dull and non-threatening’ for their dating avatar. The ploy resulted in the receipt of 40 letters in the first week and 15 after. The joke continued somewhat darkly when ‘Mark Scott’ met up with a woman from London. He rang her up on speakerphone so his friends could listen in, and then arranged to meet her, saying he would wear a particular jacket. This ‘was a lie because if when I got there she looked a mess I would not identify myself and could slip away.’

This account openly revolves around duplicity, tones of misogyny (the idea that women were there to be ‘sneered at’ and ditched if they ‘looked a mess’) as well as the feelings driving him and his friends to engage collectively in what amounted to a ritual shaming of the date. But the ploy went beyond a homosocial ritual, extending to a date. The testimony offers a flicker of mutual regard when the man recounts how he and Karen went to a pub and talked. But the date – and the whole testimony – was framed by the need to satirise the mediation of meeting women. Indeed this tale is presented as a lesson in how mediation can be manipulated and subverted. Not only were further meetings shunned when it transpired she was a ‘devout Christian’ but, having invited her home, Karen was shown further deliberate inconsiderateness. ‘I knew I had no intention of seeing her again and I didn’t care if she didn’t like my mates or home.’ A final reflection allows some consideration of the impact of his actions: ‘I suppose I do feel sorry for her and the other women who my mates went out with’ but the account concludes with a return to detachment: ‘but at the time it was just so funny to us’.

For this man, lonely hearts was for ‘losers’, and he therefore positioned the women who advertised as strange or irregular; unnatural people to meet. Instead of offering an

opportunity to encounter women on an equal footing of singleness, this story highlighted how mediation could be used to create and enhance sexual dissonance and otherness. As we will see in more detail in Mary's experience, the sense of encountering people who jarred with, not to say offended, one's sense of self-worth also came through in women's encounters with men. One 53-year-old Mass Observer from London wrote of her experience using Dateline: 'What a revelation. Most of them... didn't have the first idea how to deal with [women]. What shocked me was how uninteresting and unadventurous they were (a number said to me 'you go on holiday alone?').'⁵⁷ Her independence and self-sufficiency, contrasted with the feebleness of the men, suggested that in the lonely hearts pages at least, men were moving away from idealised versions of masculinity, and were therefore not only unattractive but not the type with whom women saw themselves. Elaine recalled of her outings with Dateline, 'I don't know if it was just bad luck, the men I met were not terribly well educated....' They didn't manipulate the service to overdetermine the distance between themselves (the 'normal' party) and their dates, as the *NME* advertiser did. Nonetheless, for these women singles services did seem to sharpen the sense that blind pairings produced disappointment and a sense of unbridgeable difference in the romantic encounter.

Dating as consumption

Expectations

The discomfort with mediated dating expressed in the preceding testimonies was somewhat localised, their sexual dissonance remembered through specific encounters with the opposite sex. As suggested earlier, however, dating services could also elicit a broader discomfort that stemmed from the friction between pragmatic self-positioning and money-spending on the one hand and the apparently 'natural' development of authentic feeling on the other. This section explores an analogous problem: to what degree did daters allow themselves to approach mediated dating as consumers? And what problems were posed when the searched-for partner was also evaluated in materialistic terms (income, professional background?) Colette Sinclair provided a stark reminder of the stigma attached to appearing mercenary, judged harshly by observers

⁵⁷Ibid., R2247.

and cultural arbiters for openly seeking a man who could provide a luxury lifestyle, and for doing so through a methodical approach to dating agencies and ads. Heather Heber Percy, the matchmaker, commented that she was ‘shamelessly...just out for money’.⁵⁸ I will discuss Sinclair’s memoir in some depth too as a rich example of the numerous levels in which consumer status, materialism and instrumentalisation of the romantic quest could both shape and confuse the mediated dating experience.

Scholars have debated the extent to which romance and courtship (not necessarily in reference to mediated dating) have been colonised by market imperatives acting both within and outside the individual or couple. Eva Illouz has insisted that over the course of the 20th century, romance became ‘a potent idiom through which the culture of consumption addresses our desires’.⁵⁹ Without addressing romance or love, Matthew Hilton has identified consumption as a key means by which 20th century citizens ‘moulded their political consciousness’.⁶⁰ Yet as Hochschild and Illouz, building on the theories of Fromm, Marcuse and the Frankfurt School, have made clear, the expanding field of late 20th century consumption moulded other types of consciousness too, including that which relates to the constitution of romance.

Here we might consider Colin Campbell’s classic theory of modern hedonistic consumption, revolving around the changed nature of expectation. Unlike its ‘traditional’ predecessor, modern pleasure is sought ‘via emotional and not merely sensory stimulation’, using a set of ‘modern’ emotional skills that enables individuals to create, stoke and harness emotion on command.⁶¹ Mirroring Weber, Campbell links such emotional skills to the rise of the Protestant ethic in early modern Europe. The Protestant ethic, with its insistence on emotional control, in turn equipped moderns with the tools required for the ‘romanticism’ – longing imbued with fantasy – that in Campbell’s theory drives modern consumption. Campbell’s work provides an intriguing departure for considering aspects of mediated dating. For if, as he claims, modern consumption revolves around the seduction of the ‘romantic’, meaning ‘remote from everyday experience’, ‘imaginative’, suggestive of ‘grandeur’ or ‘passion’, we might

⁵⁸Interview, 21 March 2015, London.

⁵⁹Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, pp. 2-24.

⁶⁰Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: the Search For a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 1.

⁶¹Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 77.

assume that mediated dating is an ideal fusion of the spirits of both consumerism and romance.⁶² Certainly, those who bought romantic aid were not only seeking to answer an emotional need, but indulging in a host of options located within a rich imaginative terrain, heavily laden with the suggestion of future pleasure in the very emotional terms in which Campbell locates ‘modern hedonistic pleasure’. Yet what emerges in the following discussion does not follow the logic of modern hedonism in Campbell’s sense. While the purchase of cigarettes and perfumes might be imbued with romantic feeling (evoking the ‘exotic’, for instance), and triggering pleasurable longing in advance of the actual unwrapping of the product, the purchase of actual romance itself in the form of dates left buyers acutely aware of the banal textures of the transaction: the social effort, the anxiety of etiquette, forced conversation. If it was possible to accurately anticipate and read the value associated with other goods and services, then buyers of mediated dates often felt the disappointment of having been mis-sold. The prince was too often ‘a frog’.

So for mediated daters, the purchase and unwrapping of the ‘product’ itself was often anything but romantic. In revealing too clearly the context of its production, and by over-determining expectations, mediated dating frequently caused romance to evaporate, leaving a different set of feelings, from the tolerant to the wary to the fair-minded, in place. But Campbell suggests that the anticipatory part of consumption is integral to its pleasure, since ‘the essential activity of consumption is... not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure-seeking to which the product lends itself’.⁶³ We might ask: to what extent did ‘imaginative pleasure seeking’ shape the ways in which users of mediated dating platforms handled their expectations, compared to the sense that they were customers with consumer expectations *entitled* to satisfied expectations? After all, mediated daters in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s made sense of their romantic clienthood in a context of growing consumer awareness and representation. Consumer representation bodies had multiplied since the First World War, but as Hilton has shown, the post-1950s period witnessed a flourishing of government-funded groups such as the Consumer Council (1963-70), the Office of Fair Trading (1973) and the National Consumer Council (1975).⁶⁴ By the late

⁶²Ibid., p. 1.

⁶³Ibid., p. 89.

⁶⁴Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 2.

1980s, the Consumer Association – publisher of *Which?* – reached peak membership of over one million.⁶⁵ There were more ways than ever for consumers to seek redress, and platforms in which to articulate their expectations and disappointments.

Unsurprisingly, the more money daters spent on a service, and the more ambitious or insistent the service's marketing materials, the greater the 'returns' they expected. Therefore for agency customers more than for lonely hearts advertisers, the relationship between their quest for love and their expenditure – between cost and benefit – was more taut. Agencies were expensive, costing up to £1,500 per year for a dozen introductions and raising expectations accordingly.⁶⁶ Michael remembered exactly how much he paid for Hedi Fisher's services in 1990: '£150 to register, £20 for an interview, £250 for marriage'.⁶⁷ The agencies' front office – sales staff and usually female matchmakers who purported to be excellent at assessing personal needs – further bolstered expectation. Clients were wooed through their emotional pressure points, through a kind of ad-hoc psychological profiling, as Julia, the matchmaker at an 'exclusive' London agency, made clear. The experience of going in for an interview was intense and the customer's hopes were usually boosted in that setting, convincing them to pay on the spot for membership. Afterwards, the customer might express unease about the gap between promise and reality. Sinclair's account of two Hedi Fisher dates accentuated the banality of the disappointment: 'lots of promises but nothing at the end of it except two rather gruelling evenings, and a lot of hard work for me'.⁶⁸ Mary described the experience of the interplay between the psychologically and emotionally-honed sales pitch, interview and reality in more detail. 'I suppose [the interview] convinced me that I would find people based on all the criteria I had offered up, that my expectations were to be matched with somebody with whom I was compatible were reasonable'.⁶⁹ Expectations were therefore intensely rigged, but the 'pleasure' of anticipation often became anxiety at having made a poor consumer decision and anxiety about potentially unreasonable expectations. After a particularly disastrous date, Mary adopted a corrective stance. Finding the company's matchmaking

⁶⁵Thirty Years of 'Which?', *Consumer's Association, 1957-1987* (London: 1987), cited in Hilton, *Consumerism In Twentieth Century Britain.*, p. 3.

⁶⁶Fee for four introductions charged by the elite agency Julia worked for, cited in interview, 10 July 2016, London.

⁶⁷Interview.

⁶⁸Colette Sinclair, *Manhunt* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989), p. 157.

⁶⁹Interview.

record with her ‘very poor, very very poor’, she felt she ‘had to ring them up’ and say “this person needs to be taken off your books”. I felt that he was totally inappropriate – not just for me...’⁷⁰ Likewise when Cockburn’s interviewee Annie joined an agency the ‘really inadequate guys’ produced for her caused her to ‘complai[n] to the agency by letter’ because ‘it costs a lot you know, it’s not cheap’.⁷¹

Occasionally, the interview itself put clients off by collapsing their expectations under a poorly managed sell. One woman struck agencies off her list of options following an interview as uncomfortable in its implications as its atmosphere. It was ‘chilly... I was so affronted to be thought a gold-digger’. The result was that she became ‘continually amazed by the thought of pairing up through an agency or a lonely hearts column’.⁷² Another was also disappointed by both the content and form of her agency experience, whose opportunism was not sufficiently concealed. ‘When I contacted the agency I was horrified to be told that I was rather old and might be difficult to match with anyone! However I was asked to go to a meeting with a principal of the agency. After she had met me she opined that I was lively and good.’⁷³ The matchmaker failed to facilitate any dates with ‘frisson’, so ‘I decided that if I was going to meet another man (and I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to) then it would have to be “naturally” through work or through friends’.⁷⁴ When another Mass Observer ‘tried a dating agency called the DSS (divorced, separated and singles!) club’ she found it ‘so artificial and a complete failure, being approached by a few sad men I didn’t fancy in the slightest.’⁷⁵ These testimonies do not suggest indulgence in hedonistic fantasy of the unknown, embellished by the pleasure of anticipating the emotional caramel of a romantic encounter. On one hand, they suggest the sense of disappointment of customers whose other purchases might have been monitored by the Consumer Association. On the other, agencies’ failure to find them suitable matches left singles with a quality of dissatisfaction uniquely complicated by the networks of affect involved in the romantic quest.

Lonely hearts ads were more often approached as an experiment – personal and social – and therefore with ‘open-mindedness’ rather than with consumer expectations. Divorcee

⁷⁰Interview.

⁷¹Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 76.

⁷²MOP, DR, C2844, Summer 2001.

⁷³Ibid., M1979.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid., T1843.

Robert's breezy formulation was typical: 'my philosophy in all this [personals advertising] is be relaxed, open-minded and have a sense of humour. I think you really have to be like that...', while Maggie's approach was 'mild and exploratory'.⁷⁶ Lonely hearts ads may have been cheaper and more self-driven than agencies, less akin to a service and more like a personal project. But their chief offering of choice nonetheless encouraged advertisers to see themselves to differing degrees as customers and consumers too.⁷⁷ The dating industry did not necessarily lend itself straightforwardly to a consumer approach, consumer satisfaction, nor, perhaps ironically, to the fusion of romance and consumption theorised by Campbell. But because it was structured by the assumption that many frogs preceded the prince, singles were acutely aware of their competitive advantage or disadvantage, and frequently used vocabularies drawn from the market. I want to turn to this language now as evidence of the complexity with which singles identified as romantic clients, stressing materialism first in how men described the dating process, and then moving to a discussion of Sinclair's account.

Shopping for love: marketised language and the tensions of romantic clienthood

In the documentary *Singles*, Monica's date Jonathan echoed the sentiments of male *Singles* (magazine) readers in reducing the romantic quest to a (female) interrogation of material worth: 'What a woman is after is his man's balls- his home, his car, she wants everything and she'll make him pay for it...' For Jonathan, the sexual, the material, and the transactional all fell within a rubric of 'payment', with women exacting a cost that seemed to negate any pleasure in the union.⁷⁸ Just as Cockburn's interviewees found women 'daunting' sexually, Jonathan saw them in fundamentally adversarial economic terms. Nick, another subject of *Singles*, used the vocabulary of progressive self-awareness and sexual frankness in describing his ideal partner ('a soulmate, best friend, total companion, lover') but he also specified the desire for someone that 'likes good wine, eating at good restaurants, blow jobs'. Nick's elision of the sexual and the material into a kind of shopping list didn't explicitly denigrate the women he'd met, like the previous male subjects, but the sense emerged that a 'soulmate' could be broken into

⁷⁶Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, both p. 162.

⁷⁷Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 54

⁷⁸*Singles* (Thames, 1992).

parts that had little to do with inner qualities. Taste played its role as matchmaker (good restaurants, good wine), but the woman also had to have an adequate sexual repertoire. A similar outlook was apparent in the BBC's *Man Seeks Woman* (1995), which stressed from the start the masculine fungibility of appetites: cars, women, sex, cinemas were all desired from the same conceptual and visceral place. Pete was a self-described 'Italian stallion from Slough' who lived in a bedsit in Staines, and worked as a double glazer.

I like to live life in the fast lane, restaurants, clubs, pubs, cinemas, you name it, I'm doing it and if I'm not doing any of that we're having sex, mad passionate sex, it's got to be to wild sex though, it's not boring stuff, it's highly physically demanding sex. So yeah, that's the kind of woman I'm looking for.

Sometimes specific brands became ciphers for the wider package. Monica from *Singles* was filmed as the Sarah Eden agency paired her with Richard, 36. Richard said he didn't like women 'to dress from H&M and Top Shop' which went with wanting 'nobody intellectual or arty' but a 'real person'.

For Pete, it had 'got' to be 'wild sex', with life in the material 'fast lane'; Richard's looked-for partner wouldn't wear clothes from Top Shop, and Nick wanted a 'total companion' but, like Pete and Richard, his description betrayed an internal checklist similar to the one he might have taken to buy a car. These requirements suggested that mediated dating lent itself to confusion about the nature of a possible romantic partner. The very articulation of what singles 'wanted' brought the romantic search closer to an act of shopping than mere metaphor, and reduced the sense that the single might at some point seek to enter into a dynamic relation with someone.⁷⁹ Having been invited, through the matchmaking process, to specify what the 'total companion' and the 'real person' meant, these men produced a list of specifiable parts suitable for the modern consumer. But the list, and the language they deployed, took them very far indeed from 'romance' as defined in the cultural terms discussed in the introduction, and far also

⁷⁹For the classic text on how linguistic tropes structure thought and feeling, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). See also discussion specifically on the reciprocal relationship between the shopping metaphor often used to describe mediated dating, and the experiences of users, in Zoe Strimpel (2013), *Meat Market or Brave New World? How Women Go Shopping For Dates Online*, MPhil thesis, University of Cambridge, pp. 11-14, and Rebecca Heino et al. (2010) 'Relation shopping: Investigating the Market Metaphor in Online Dating', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27 (4), pp. 427-447.

from the often pragmatic but not materialistic attitudes brought to light in the studies by Langhamer and Szreter and Fisher.

It was not just men who employed the language of materialism, as Colette Sinclair's memoir, *Manhunt*, makes clear. Sinclair provided an extreme portrait of the ways in which consumer, sexual and professional discourse could be brought together for the female dater in the 1980s. *Manhunt* therefore helps crystallise both how broader economic and cultural shifts in the 1980s could be refracted through the language and feelings surrounding romantic relationality, and how these could be experienced in a sex-specific way. As well as underlining the unique pressures and expectations assigned to female singles, Sinclair's exhaustive quest made clear that it was the extra labour of managing mediation itself, regardless of form, that could generate a clash between the self as consumer and the self as an emotional individual seeking out romantic feeling.

Sinclair saw the quest for a man in a multi-faceted way, but all the facets, including the emotional ones, were conceived of in terms of service-fulfilment. First, the man would be there to provide 'an ordinary family life with a father figure' for her daughter aged two. Personally, she 'needed someone to love, be loved by and to support us'. By 'support', she meant 'comfortably-off...an entrepreneurial type, independent of mind and means'.⁸⁰

More urgently, however, Sinclair had a 'pressing overdraft', a fractious mother who was tired of offering free board, lodging and childcare, and the conviction that she 'could hardly go out to work with a small baby...I would never earn enough to support us and pay for a nanny for her'.⁸¹ Together, Sinclair and her mother hatched a plan:

Mummie and I decided that somewhere out there, there was a suitably attractive, kind, comfortably off, dependable, family-minded man who would be only too happy to have me as his wife, and Moya has his daughter. The question was – where on earth to find him?⁸²

Central to the unravelling of the *Manhunt* story – an unconventional one because her efforts did not yield Mr Right – was Sinclair's taste for luxury and the fine things in life.

⁸⁰Sinclair, *Manhunt*, pp. 28-29.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 28.

⁸²Ibid., p. 29.

While class is explicitly discussed in her account of her early years, with emphasis on signifiers such as boarding school, an educated father and horse-riding, Sinclair's project of self-explication increasingly moved towards a catalogue of overtly materialistic tastes. These were partly a cipher for her own discernment and a way of defining herself. They also represented an instability at the core of her quest, evoked in Zygmunt Bauman's theory of modern ambivalence. Bauman argues that the modern emphasis on lifestyle and taste enables a marketised self-construction that is used as a self-protecting substitute for love. 'Through the market, one can put together various elements of the complete 'identikit' of a DIY self...[to] express oneself as a modern, liberated woman... or ruthless and self-confident tycoon'.⁸³ Bauman astutely posits that the attraction of this kind of self-construction, especially among those seeking love, is that it replaces the 'torments' of the real, ragged self being rejected with a 'pleasurable act of choice between ready-made patterns'.⁸⁴ Indeed Sinclair's repetitive return to her attainment of luxuries read more like an attempt to remind herself that she was literally worth something: for instance, following her transformation from 'ugly duckling' to beauty she 'began to go out with the head boy of Lancing College, the public school on the hill. He took me to parties, there was laughing and kissing and lots of champagne. All quite smart and a lot of fun....'⁸⁵ Later, in Brighton, she dated many men, including a married man who 'was wealthy and getting wealthier. I enjoyed his company, his attentions and his money. I looked good, had a ball and bought myself an MGB-BT'.⁸⁶

At 30, with three marriages behind her and a daughter, Sinclair's quest to meet Mr Right was introduced with an assurance that she was an attractive, diverse product herself.

I am attractive for my age,' she wrote, 'now thirty-one, but not a dolly bird...I have not skinny, not fat, a size twelve...I possibly talk too much, but that's because I have a brain that moves even faster than my tongue...I cry at movies...but I can also be hard-headed...I am many different things, a mass of contradictions, but the sum of the parts is not unpleasant.'⁸⁷

⁸³Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 206.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 207. For theoretical analysis of the relationship between tastes, status and historicity, see Mike Savage, 'Status, Lifestyle and Taste', in Frank Trentmann (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 551-568.

⁸⁵Sinclair, *Manhunt*, p. 21.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 28.

But we should not read such passages as indicative of an emotional economy purely motored by materialist, consumer-style considerations over the ‘authentic’ model of love and feeling. Rather they are a new kind of mixture of the two. To see Sinclair as purely materialistic would be to flatten the *tension* at the heart of mediated matchmaking that shaped her quest: between the methodical and the magical; the mercenary and the authentic; the planned and the serendipitous; the satisfaction of attributes and chemistry. A husband had to be ‘only too happy to have me as his wife’ and was not simply to be a source of financial security and shelter; he was to satisfy emotional as well as a sexual conditions, and Sinclair insisted on an authentic sexual ‘gelling’. Thus Sinclair’s account underlines the confusion that could underscore romantic clienthood. If a partner was something you paid for, like any other service, could you be as specific in your requirements as you could for, say, one of the cars she so often referred to? While Sinclair tells us she wants a caring, kind husband above all, and throughout the account rejects men for being rich but unkind, the language in which her project is set lapses repeatedly into what reads as a category error, signalled by the disconcerting elision of the professional, financial, cultural and physical aspects of a potential match. She appears unsure of her conceptual footing – romantically and emotionally – when she writes this disorderly list:

He should be taller than me, ideally 6 ft 4 inches, but 5 feet 11 inches would be fine... He should not be bald, and I would prefer him to wear contact lenses (I do) if he needed help with his eyesight. He should have a good physique....he should want to spend time with Moya...being a family at home, or going on outings. Alone together we might go to the theatre, cinema, discos, concerts. If he had his own interests like a boat somewhere it would be good, but he should not expect me to paint the hull every weekend.⁸⁸

Sinclair’s vocabulary was also suggestive of what I have in this thesis argued were new forms of emotional pragmatism underpinning the (mediated) search for love. Thus beneath her hunt for luxury and the zealously systematic method undertaken, there was an earnest search for a committed partnership. Sinclair was repeatedly disappointed by the untempered materialism or shoddy manners she found in the men she met through the dating industry. Their flashiness betrayed unreliability or nastiness, their wealth often signalled a taste for sexual coercion, their high-paying jobs made them seem

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 29.

miserly in comparison, or bad father material. Caught between the desire for a stable commitment and an addiction to men as purveyors of luxury and security, Sinclair could be seen as a victim of the 'can-do/can-have' approach to the expanded field of dating options in the late 1980s. Certainly, she treated the search with determination, strategy, an open purse and a large store of effort, making herself the archetypal modern single. However, the disappointment of her return product signalled starkly the limits both of mediated dating and of treating the romantic quest in a consumerist fashion. Sinclair's case suggested that the effort required for finding that needle in the haystack could also merely exhaust a person's resources – emotional and financial – and corrode their self-confidence.

The date

Encountering the opposite sex

As we approach the date itself, we need to take stock of a final piece of context: singles' perceptions of the opposite sex as a significant factor setting up the romantic encounter. As I have shown elsewhere, the romantic encounter between single men and women at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s could be fraught.⁸⁹ Cockburn's male subjects reveal the extent to which feminism often negatively defined perceptions of the women they were encountering. To their male counterparts, some women seemed disturbingly alive to the possibilities of exerting control over their romantic lives. As Cockburn's narrative suggests, it was difficult for women to strike the right balance between 'not settling' and thereby showing diminished self-regard, and being demanding to only the correct degree. While Susan was simply answering the question Cockburn asked in a detailed manner, his commentary stressed the extremity of her expectation, noting

⁸⁹Strimpel (2017), 'In Solitary Pursuit: Singles, Sex War and the Search For Love, 1977-1983', *Cultural and Social History* (online). Despite a widespread media discourse positing 'masculinity in crisis' and endemic 'sex war' at this time, which intensified throughout the 1980s and 1990s, I am keen not to over-determine any link between the tensions that emerged in mediated dating to this wider discourse, mainly because the idea of 'sex war' or 'masculinity in crisis' obscures the complexities and contradictions within sexual relationships, and therefore how they functioned, imposing something of a crude framework on the individual experiences discussed here. However, I am aware that given the prominence of such discourse, my subjects' own perceptions and vocabularies might have reflected some of its tropes. For a discussion both of the idea of 'masculinity in crisis' in the 1980s and 1990s, and of the dubiousness of the claim, as well as that of a 'new breed' of rapacious single women, see Collins, *Modern Love*, pp. 208-212, and pp. 212-214; Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London: Palgrave, 1997).

‘perhaps Susan will find this exceptional man using the fine toothcomb technique, but she is also going to need a lot of luck to make that magic meeting happen’.⁹⁰ The suggestion was that Susan had fallen into the trap of being an excessively demanding single woman, reminding us of how slippery was the terrain single women had to navigate.⁹¹ Meanwhile, Annie had ‘very high standards’; she’d ‘sooner be lonely for the rest of my life than partner some of the men I’ve met.’⁹² Yet despite Cockburn’s hinted disapproval, it’s clear that the personals offered one way in which ‘picky’ women could exert as much control as they wanted over the process, foregrounding one of the key benefits women attributed to the use of internet dating cited 30 years later.⁹³

Henry, 56, a local government officer with ‘basically masculine’ interests, was one example of a man who found the encounter with ‘modern’ women – and specifically her sexual confidence – problematic. He rarely met women and craved affection – but while dates arranged through *Singles* offered ‘respectable sensible’ people of the kind he was looking for, the women were ‘aggressive’ and ‘daunting’.⁹⁴ Another advertiser was also dismayed by how ‘aggressive and forward’ the women were:

Honestly on several occasions I’ve been really daunted by them. They pick me up in their car and away we go to a restaurant. Then, during the evening they get very familiar. One woman I met was very much like that. In fact she became so familiar and physical it put me right off her.⁹⁵

This interviewee had met “‘over 80 women, and to be honest I have very little to show for it’”. The tension between practice and feeling that this thesis argues for is evident in these accounts, as the decision to meet up to ‘80’ women – only a recently available (and respectable) option for the ordinary single, and a bold embrace of the ‘architecture’ of sexual choice defining modern life – is marred by the encounter itself, with women who have suddenly become sexually ‘daunting’ in their modern guise.⁹⁶ Of course, such articulations of alienation between the sexes should not be read as entirely

⁹⁰Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 75.

⁹¹Faludi dissects this in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1993); see also the discussion of women’s relationship advice literature in Arlie Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 22-29.

⁹²Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 80.

⁹³Strimpel (2013), *Meat Market*, pp. 23 and 56-61.

⁹⁴Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 95.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 94.

representative of wider historical realities of women's (or men's) attitudes; as the surveys discussed in Chapter One suggested, there was in fact relatively little divergence in attitudes towards relationships, for instance monogamy and casual sex, between men and women.⁹⁷ However, the trope of modern women possessing daunting sexual single-mindedness was widespread in the media (as well as in advice literature directed at women as Hochschild, Faludi and Illouz have shown), and this discourse almost certainly shaped the way men such as Harry described their encounters with women.⁹⁸

Other differences appeared to characterise the match-made encounter between men and women. Men appeared to suffer more from loneliness and social dysfunction than the women interviewed.⁹⁹ According to Cockburn, they were often single 'because their previous relationship has recently ended. They suddenly find themselves alone, and don't like it', raising questions such as 'how is sexuality to be managed...where can emotional need be satisfied?'¹⁰⁰ Cockburn divided male mediated daters into four main categories: 'heartbroken'; 'unsettled types'; 'shy or short' and 'busy people'. The most emotionally-charged accounts came from the shy, who predictably found the clash between gender role expectation and personal inclination most painful. For Peter, 47, a British Rail Clerk, debilitating social unease led him to use personals.

I [advertise] because I share what I think is a common problem. Some men who are a little bit on the shy side find it very difficult to make a cold-blooded meeting...this is a good way of meeting because all the groundwork has been

⁹⁷Marcus Collins makes this point in *Modern Love*, pp. 212-214.

⁹⁸This is not to say that the women that men like Harry met were *not* more sexually confident than they might have been a decade or two before; the rolling out of life with contraception, as well as the development of other discursive and practical shifts in norms around sex in the 1970s certainly enabled many women to build a new sexual repertoire of experience and taste, as, for instance, Jeffrey Weeks suggests in *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London: Routledge, 2007); and as highlighted in Mechen, *Everyday Sex*, p. 22.

⁹⁹Studies of masculinity have increasingly taken account of distinct male psycho-sexual and social problems, though these have been particularly linked to the world wars. Lesley Hall (1985) '“Somehow Very Distasteful”: Doctors, Men and Sexual Problems between the Wars', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20 (4), pp. 553-574; Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Mike Roper (2007) unpacks the constructedness of masculinity concisely in 'Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity and the First World War Veteran', *Men's Studies Press*, 15 (3), pp. 251-270. For a more recent analysis based in everyday contemporary life, see Patricia McDaniel, *Shrinking Violets and Caspar Milquetoasts, Shyness, Power, and Intimacy in the United States, 1950-1995* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁰Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 86.

done...I've always been a bit of a shy person...a couple of years ago I even tried a hypnotherapist...but that didn't work!¹⁰¹

In the 1996 BBC documentary *Man Seeks Woman* male shyness and social awkwardness was brought into heart-rending focus with Simon Emery, a bachelor who had been single 'all my life' and lived in a caravan on his parents' farm. Simon drove a three-wheeler, having been unable to pass the standard driving test (the car invited some disparaging comments from his dates) and found that 'I'm not one of these people who can give a straight chat up line...I get lonely...I'm no oil painting'. He'd been close to two women in his life but both had left him because of 'second thoughts and cold feet...it really did knock my faith in human beings'.

The date in context

Having sketched out the perceptual context in which singles articulated their romantic aspirations, we are ready to turn to the date itself for a closer-range view of how these dynamics played out in the febrile romantic encounter. This analysis, after discussing the evolution of the contemporary, food and drink-oriented date, will be rounded off with a discussion the experiences of the divorced social worker Mary, born 1945, who went on a number of dates through an agency in the 1990s. Mary's is a particularly rich case study because it brings together the tensions that could arise when men and women faced each other across a table, the sexual valence assigned to transactions to do with food and drink, and the awareness of the mediated, artificial commercial context of meeting. Mary's experience also forces us to recognise how flammable romantic encounters still could be in the mid-1990s when it came to the old questions of power in terms of both money and knowledge.

Despite discomfort with the word, the emergence of the 'date' and the question of what to do on it had become pressing as the old system of 'calling' was replaced by excursions usually dependent on the male wallet (to the cinema, the café, the dance).¹⁰² Of course, as the MOP Summer 2001 directive makes clear, not all British courtships even in the post-1960s period involved spending money – for some, courtship was a

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰²Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in 20th Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 58.

‘certain amount of time lurking on badly lit corners’.¹⁰³ And in Britain, courtship practices up to the 1960s included gatherings such as the Monkey Walk and the Chicken Run in which young people participated in public rituals of display and performance, parading en masse to catch the eye of a member of the opposite sex.¹⁰⁴ Compared to the American emphasis on ‘dating and rating’, British courtships could be comparatively organic-seeming.¹⁰⁵ But by the late 1960s, both cinema and Monkey Walk, as well as the dance hall, were in decline as key courtship venues, with pub culture and coffee bars increasingly absorbing young people, as well as the private spaces of the home and bedroom with their record players and televisions.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, as I have already outlined, a number of contraceptive and legislative developments meant that the 1970s saw the emergence of new norms around courtship. Crucially, women as well as men were increasingly seeking experience for its own sake rather than as a path to marriage. This coincided with platforms such as *Dateline* and *Time Out* promoting a high quantity of dates; options that, as we saw earlier in this chapter, could be instrumentalised in a variety of ways. Crucially, unlike the terrain around mid-century courtship, this was a romantic landscape for professionals and older people – including growing numbers of divorcees – rather than teenagers. Not only were professional skills brought to bear on managing a mediated dating ‘portfolio’, as Cockburn’s subject Susan put it, but eating and drinking in public were integral to such meetings, and required the type of planning that called on mature skills including logistical creativity and compromise.¹⁰⁷ As Cockburn noted, ‘the place of meeting is always a major consideration...neutral ground is emphasised....Pubs, hotel bars, coffee shops and the like are favoured places....’¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³Quoted in Claire Langhamer, *The English In Love*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 137; Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham: OUP Press, 1992), pp. 104-105.

¹⁰⁵Willard Waller (1937) ‘The rating and dating complex’, *American Sociological Review*, 2, pp. 727-734. The lower-profile of expenditure in British courtship, compared to America, is likely related to the fact that Americans were richer in the post-war period; US incomes led those of the British about one generation since 1950. Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Wellbeing in the United States and Britain Since 1950* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 7.

¹⁰⁶See Brooke, “‘A Certain Amount of Mush’”, p. 91; and for television’s role in encouraging a retreat indoors, often atomised, Joe Moran, *Armchair Nation: An Intimate History of Britain in Front of the TV* (London: Profile Books, 2013), pp. 1-13.

¹⁰⁷Cockburn, *Lonely Hearts*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, p. 137.

As the century drew to a close, restaurants and bars had become integral to courtship settings. The centrality to the romantic process of dinner in the period under study can be read as an accumulation of norms around intimacy that had been in train since the 1920s in both Britain and the US, in which leisure expenditure was key, and couples were ‘increasingly positioned within the public realm of consumption’.¹⁰⁹ In her 1997 study, Eva Illouz found that of the three categories of activity people assigned to the ‘romantic moment’, the gastronomic – and especially eating out – was the most common, followed by the cultural and touristic.¹¹⁰ Dinners out carried deep associations with romance over and above other forms of shared leisure because of their ritualised consumption: restaurants ‘enable people to step out of their daily lives into a setting saturated with ritual meaning’.¹¹¹ If meals were romantic because they were special occasions, ‘out of’ daily life, their importance for courtship also mirrored an expanding and diversifying catering industry, in which more exotic types of food, including European and Indian, began not only to enter the supermarket but to shape restaurant concepts, and in which pubs increasingly served dinner.¹¹² Along with the diversification and expansion of drinking options, the romantic landscape of leisure and consumption in Britain stretched in all directions. From the early 1970s, pubs were opened up and expanded to be more spacious and inviting, and also increased their offering with more sophisticated food menus, a development which appealed to those less keen on ‘propping up the bar’ (women).¹¹³ Meanwhile, the number of licenses for restaurants and hotels outpaced those of pubs by eight times between 1974 and 1979.¹¹⁴

In his polemical 1973 study of the American singles industry, *The Mating Trade*, John Godwin stressed the importance of setting from the outset, growing social and romantic isolation on the decline of ‘downtown ballrooms’ and the ‘hotel cocktail dance’. He

¹⁰⁹Claire Langhamer (2007), ‘Love and Courtship in Mid-Twentieth-Century England’, *The Historical Journal*, 50 (1), pp. 173-196: 194.

¹¹⁰Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, pp. 121 and 125.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, p.128.

¹¹²John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London: Longman, 1994), e.g. pp. 35-38. On restaurants’ boom decades in the 1960s and 1970s: ‘Steak men see ways of diversifying’, *The Times*, 19 April 1967, p. 28; ‘Restaurants - The way we were: Why the British diner has never had it so good’, *The Independent*, 15 Nov 1997; for a broader discussion of the evolution of the British restaurant industry which stresses the importance of the 1970s in the proliferation of restaurants, books and other food-related products, see John Burnett, *England Eats Out: A Social History of Eating Out in England From 1830 to The Present* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2004), pp. 288-315.

¹¹³The average pub carpet order expanded from 75 yards in 1974 to 130 yards in 1979, in David Gutzke, *Women Drinking Out in Britain Since The Early Twentieth Century* (Manchester: MUP, 2016), p. 103; on women, *The Economist*, 9 Nov 1985, cited in Gutzke, *Women Drinking*, p. 103.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

noted with envy the ‘the splendid meeting places of the Old World’, British pubs and European cafes, lambasting the expensive, socially-awkward, intimidating options available to American singles in the form of bars – singles and otherwise.¹¹⁵ Godwin was right to point to the British pub as a key venue for socialising as well as a setting for dates: alcohol in Britain was integral to the romantic encounter. Pubs were joined soon by wine bars, which signalled a new era in drinking culture, and further established the importance of alcohol to the courtship setting.¹¹⁶ Wine bars – increasingly visible in the 1970s – were marketed to appeal as spaces that welcomed women and capitalised on the sophistication and diversity of wine that resounded with the Mediterranean trends seen in cooking.¹¹⁷ Between 1965 and 1985, London gained 250 wine bars, and cities like Bristol also took up the trend. These were self-consciously aimed at women, with bans on staff that had previously worked in pubs, and a high proportion of female employees.¹¹⁸ By the mid-1980s, a quarter of Britons, many of them women, were frequenting wine bars.¹¹⁹ John Patterson, head of *Dateline* and *Singles* magazine, as well as the owner of a wine bar, Tiles, near South Kensington in London, linked women’s increasing freedom in the sexual and financial spheres to their confident appropriation of these spaces. Writing in *Singles*’ first issue, he lamented: ‘I should have been born in the age of the wine bar. It is a fact that in London, and in most large cities in this country girls can now walk into a wine bar on their own without raising an eyebrow. And indeed they do’.¹²⁰ Certainly, Colette Sinclair’s detailed account meticulously recorded the material significance of different drinks, indicating female connoisseurship, as well as the drinks’ entry as a key part of the sequence of the date and indicator of the romantic outlook. A date with a man she dubbed Mr Poona Poona became progressively more disappointing when they found themselves at lunch where ‘they were serving Andre’s Californian champagne, available at Jack’s discount

¹¹⁵ John Godwin, *The Mating Trade* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973), p. 22.

¹¹⁶ For the parameters of drinking in earlier periods, such as those defined by temperance, religion and the spirits and brewing trade, see the classic Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (Keele University Press, 1994) and Phil Withington (2011), ‘Intoxicants and Society in Early Modern England’, *The Historical Journal*, 54 (3), pp. 631-657.

¹¹⁷ Gutske, *Women Drinking Out*, p. 83.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132; for London as a centre of wine bars and the appeal of ‘watching the assignments’ they attracted, see Michael Elliott, *Heartbeat London: The Anatomy of a Supercity* (London: Firethorn, 1986), p. 147. They were for people who to engage ‘a lot more in talking than drinking’ but for all the emphasis non-threatening conviviality, wine bars introduced a new classed dimension to having drinks, requiring the ability to negotiate sometimes long lists of French vintages, plus an appetite for cheese from Paris and smoked goose, *ibid.*, p. 133 and Barbara Rogers, *Men Only: An Investigation Into Men’s Organizations* (London, Pandora, 1988), pp. 10-11.

¹¹⁹ *Bistros, Inns and Wine Bars in Britain* (Basingstoke: Automobile Association, 1985), pp. 8-9.

¹²⁰ *Singles*, 1 (May 1977), p. 6.

store for \$1.99...and Sainsbury's claret, which also got the "oh gosh, how spiffing this is" treatment', to Colette's horror.¹²¹

Yet the flipside to women's apparently new alcohol-related freedom was that alcohol was increasingly an expected romantic and social emollient for dates, both courted and monitored for its ability to lower boundaries. For dating memoirist Paul Reizen, writing in the late 1990s, every date began in a bar, but he was repeatedly (and comically) thrown off by women who wouldn't get drunk. The scrupulously recorded opening scene of his memoir sees him waiting for a date in the Library Bar of the Lanesborough Hotel. A connoisseur both of bars and Guardian Soulmates dating, Reizen chooses this venue to impress the woman whose voice had a 'breathy resonance' he found exciting. Twenty minutes early, he had started on a 'world-class martini'.¹²² The encounter, which starts as a disaster ('I struggle to keep the disappointment off my face') unfolds through the rituals demanded by the setting.¹²³ He offers a drink; the barman 'shimmers up before us', he 'watches her face as she studies the drinks list' and sinks into despair when she orders a 'ginger beer'.¹²⁴ He, instead, drinks four martinis and blacks out at the end of the evening. Another more successful date starts at 'Browns at six-thirty on a Wednesday evening', in which 'I find myself a position at the bar from where I can monitor the door, order a glass of house white and begin to get nervous'.¹²⁵ A 'knockout' walks in but once more refuses alcohol, leaving Reizen on the back foot: sexually desperate, frustrated, full of self-recrimination and longing for the now-vanished woman.

Women understood that the approach towards alcohol shaped the distribution of power on the date: as Pen Fudge recalled, 'I tried going out to bars but that was awful. I found to my cost that once alcohol is involved, things get out of hand on many levels.'¹²⁶ Depending on how it was handled, alcohol could also become a source of information about the sexual and moral delicacy of the male date. In 1977, Joan, a *Singles* reader,

¹²¹Sinclair, *Manhunt*, p. 65. Sinclair gives the cost in dollars presumably because she used to buy the wine during a period, discussed elsewhere in the memoir, in which she lived in California.

¹²²Paul Reizen, *Date Expectations: One Man's Voyage Through the Lonely Hearts* (London: Bantam, 2005), p. 18.

¹²³*Ibid.*, pp. 14-24.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹²⁶Email correspondence.

wrote a letter to the magazine in which she told how a date who ‘saw her home’ informed her

that I had “no right” to deny his access to my bed because I had let him buy me drinks. I pointed out that not only had he adopted an attitude of hurt male pride when I offered to buy a round, but that if he wanted to buy a woman I understood the going price in London was rather higher than two martinis, and I wasn’t for sale.¹²⁷

The question of payment

That Pen Fudge’s boyfriend ate the lace she made served as a grotesque reminder of how rituals around ingestion could speak to wider questions of power and ownership. Certainly, it was over meals that the most concentrated power struggles took place. For many singles, a meal was a cipher for wider distortions in gender relationships seen to have emerged in the 1970s. *Singles* received so many letters about the issue of payment on dates that it ran a series on the morality and etiquette surrounding ‘going Dutch’ – paying an equal share on dates. ‘These misunderstandings about who pays are becoming more frequent as more women become independent and earn more money,’ the editor noted.¹²⁸ ‘Men feel resentful that they are obliged to take a girl out, claiming women are taking advantage of them, while women often feel old conventions still apply when out on “a date”.’ Men wrote furious responses to women who suggested that they deserved to be taken out, or complained that men made ‘constant referral to the cost of living in relation to the prices of drinks etc’.¹²⁹ One man sought to justify the position of an aggrieved ‘Miss A’, however, noting she was ‘rightly outraged at any man wishing to get emotional and physical satisfaction through her without adequate prior payment. She may have been trained by her mother not to need it, or can get it free from other girls’.¹³⁰

Women’s perceived changed economic power was at the heart of these disputes, and the dates themselves were the setting in which tensions over the gendered symbolism of the financial upper hand were played out. As scholars of the early and mid-20th century

¹²⁷*Singles*, 6 (Nov 1977), p. 8.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 47 (April 1981), p. 25.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 42 (Nov 1980), p. 5.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 45 (Feb 1980), p. 5.

have outlined in relation to an earlier set of sexual and economic conditions, eating and drinking out in post-1970 Britain was tethered to its own complex system of gendered meaning, expectation and assessment. Although it describes the American context, Beth Bailey's analysis of dating as a means by which young people established themselves as 'commodities that afforded public validation of popularity, of belonging, of success' is helpful here.¹³¹ If both the content of dates (restaurant, movie etc.) and the rank of the date him or herself were symbols of social capital, then mediated dating posed an interesting challenge to this system. After all, it was a stigmatised form of meeting that had little to offer in terms of social popularity – dates were strangers and people often kept quiet that they were meeting people this way.¹³² There were internal economies of popularity, materially evident in the piles of post that younger women were shown to receive on placing an advert, for instance in *Singles* (Carlton), and in the anguished letters to *Singles* (magazine) about being ignored. Yet compared to the more public forms of success and value that shaped traditional dating, the economy of worth and power attached to mediated dating in this period was a relatively closed one.

Essentially, mediated dating was dating in private: dates were strangers both to the dater and their friends. Thus I would argue that, stripped of the currency of public approval, mediated dating put more pressure on the date itself and its material signifiers. Where and what you ate and how it was handled were the key sources of information about the other person. The meal provided the text that social knowledge could in more traditional contexts. For instance, my interviewee Martia, an upper middle class woman, perused the personals sections of *Private Eye* and *Time Out* in the late 1970s, and went on one date arranged this way in 1979. They arranged to meet at the well-known London restaurant Joe Allen. 'It was quite trendy at the time', remembered Martia, while the date was the sort of man who afterwards 'fancied a drink at the Savoy'.¹³³ The date itself lacked chemistry from the first moment, but Martia 'wanted dinner' and felt comfortable with his tastes and manners, including the fact that he paid for dinner, which she had expected.

But the question of who paid on blind dates in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was subject to far more ambiguity and flexibility not only because assumptions about male financial

¹³¹Bailey, *From Front Porch*, p. 58.

¹³²See, for example, my interview with Elaine, in which she described mediated dating as something 'you kept to yourself'.

¹³³Interview, 4 June 2015, London.

superiority were being continually challenged in many areas of discourse, but because nobody was watching. Who picked up the bill was subject to on-the-spot discretion and mood. If the pervasive idea from mid-century Britain and America was that ‘a date centred around an act of consumption’ and that ‘one of the most important [conventions was] that the man pay the woman’s way’, then in post-1970 Britain, the picture had become murkier.¹³⁴ Some women preferred to share the bill; some to pay the whole thing or take it in turns, while some – such as Colette Sinclair – preferred an older, more American system in which their value was measured by how much the man would spend. As the letters pages in *Singles* made clear, many men resented women’s expectations and actions, whether these were about sharing, footing entirely or avoiding the bill. Whatever singles’ attitudes and feelings were towards the handling of food taken together, the meal was clearly a stage on which men and women both created and responded to a variety of tensions. The meal – in addition to other semi-public settings for consumption such as the pub – was therefore a rich source of information for both parties, as well as a lens for understanding how expectations, perceptions and technologies of mediated dating matched up to experience. With a rich selection of dates remembered in detail, I offer Mary’s experience as a case study bringing together a number of the dynamics foreshortened by the romantic transaction of the evening meal.

Case study: Mary’s dates

For some women, the decision to use an agency sat within a framework of independence that had been hard-won around life as a wife and mother and was therefore approached from a more defensive stance. If journal editor Lily, former mental health nurse Elaine as well as Adele, a BBC administrator who had signed up to Heather Jenner at the urging of her grandmother, felt they had little to lose by giving it a go, Mary had accrued plenty to lose – emotionally and financially. As she made clear in her interview with me in her hometown in Essex, she was therefore highly sensitised to the disappointments of her mediated matchmaking career and learned she would rather

¹³⁴Bailey, *From Front Porch*, p. 58; see also Langhamer, *The English In Love*, p. 195.

be single than continue meeting the kinds of men the agency and holidays had presented to her.¹³⁵

The sharpness of the tension between an adult, independent feminine self identity and the realities of match-made encounters is one reason Mary's account merits close attention. The other is that – as we draw to the end of this thesis, whose chronological end point is 2000 – Mary's experience offers the chance to reflect on how disagreements and confusions elicited by the romantic encounter continued seemingly unabated two decades after the sexual upheaval of the 1970s. As a divorcee with three grown up children, she was also meeting men in their 50s, and it is highly possible that a younger woman dating through an agency in the 1990s would have been confronted with different tensions. Among my respondents, however, Mary's account was most vividly anchored to the mealtime encounter of the date itself, and, crucially, depicted a scenario in which the fact of a woman able and keen to pay her way destabilised an expected balance of power and destroyed the possibility of romance taking root. In being self-directed, career-oriented, and financially independent, Mary embodied a dominant narrative of 1990s womanhood, but the men she met – although they were presumably aware that she was a professional and a divorcee from the information passed on by the agency – seemed unable to assimilate this fact. Thus Mary's testimony is valuable in suggesting that the lag between women's changing sexual and professional status, and the emotional response to it, particularly among men, persisted well past the point at which the male breadwinner model was thought to have been fully eroded.¹³⁶

Mary's decision to sign up to Essex-based Avenues in 1995, as she approached 50, followed from a divorce and enrolment in an evening education course in 1993. Signing up to an upmarket agency felt like a sign of success and independence, even if – as we will see – positioning her desire to meet men as an addition to a life of hard-won independence produced a disillusioning experience of reality. She felt more comfortable with the company's thick parchment paper and calligraphy print than she did with

¹³⁵Interview, 16 Dec 2015.

¹³⁶Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 16.

personal ads which she found scruffy ‘and I can’t stand that’. Recalling the decision, Mary said she had:

reached a point, where I thought I’ve done the hard work, I’ve got the qualifications, had the money to buy my own house. I was so chuffed at my excellent salary of the time, I went out and got myself a credit card, I thought I’ve got my own house, I can get a credit card...I signed up to Avenues. I can’t remember what I paid for membership, but it was a bronze, silver or gold payment. It was a policy ensuring a certain number of introductions over a period of time as well – I think I could afford the silver one, which was about 3 years. And from what I can remember I think that cost me and I am guessing truthfully – £700 pounds.

Mary’s experience of using an agency matchmaker unfolded almost entirely in the context of restaurants. But rather than affording a privileged view of the man’s wallet, the meal was instead read for a wider series of meanings. Mary’s memory of three restaurant dates arranged through Avenues exhibit the confusion that could arise as men and women were culturally and temporally pulled further away from clear rules about spending money. And as an older woman, who took pride in her financial independence, Mary did not necessarily think that male culinary patronage boded well. Being based just outside of London, Mary had to travel by car to meet dates who also lived in a loose matrix surrounding or beyond the metropolis. As Colette Sinclair also emphasised in her memoir, having to drive some distance put extra pressure on the meeting itself.

One of the few men Mary saw more than once through Avenues was ‘a Buddhist’ who had seemed promising on the phone. He was, however, more traditional in person.

He paid for a meal the first time we met and the second time we met I paid for it and he didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all...he’d taken to Buddhism later in life. Was it karma? I don’t know, but it just changed immediately. For his own sanity he took himself off to the toilet and came back not quite the same person as when he left the table.

This date’s sensitivity on the matter of who paid signalled his unsuitability, which to Mary was bound up in a form of character weakness (he lacked ‘courage’): ‘He didn’t have the courage or maybe felt it would be offensive I don’t know- but he didn’t phone me after that and I didn’t phone him. Which didn’t bother me, I mean, I didn’t come

away from that thinking I made a major faux pas'. For Mary, the tension between masculinity and femininity was not to be thrashed out over financial power relations, but decided in the way the two individuals aligned in terms of personality and values. Her date's preoccupation with paying was unfortunate, but a tangent to her central goal – in the end, it 'didn't bother' her that he had taken offence at her attempt to pay for dinner, since this indicated a broader incompatibility and it was best she learned of it sooner rather than later.

The unravelling of another potential liason took place on a previous date at a restaurant, which instead staged tensions about physical rather than financial superiority. Having spoken on the phone, Mary had found this man 'obviously intelligent... right age group etc etc'. In a spirit of equality, 'it was suggested amicably that we met half way between our homes, which was Chelmsford.' The power balance was tipped slightly in Mary's favour because she knew the restaurant he suggested. It was 'somewhere I'd been before...so I knew [it] was up quite a rickety stairway. I said oh I've been there; it's quite a nice restaurant.' Her date then said there was something he had to tell her before they met. 'And you get that dread feeling,' Mary remembered. 'He said, "I've only got one leg, I do wear a prosthetic leg but..."' Mary recalled how – rather than causing her to judge him badly – his disability triggered a habitual, professionally cultivated concern.¹³⁷ 'I know it sounds ridiculous but my job since 1986 had been within social services of Essex county council. Personally I was steeped in people's disabilities, people's financial difficulties. And I said, "will you be ok, there's rather a steep staircase up?"' Instead of impressing him, her knowledge both of the restaurant and of the possible mobility obstacles facing him annoyed him. Mary recalled how:

He took offence which told me something but it was my first date. Anyway we met, he made it up the stairs and had a pleasant meal. He bragged a lot about his

¹³⁷ Although she is particularly concerned with the exchange value of emotional labour, Arlie Hochschild still provides the key framework for thinking about the gendered ways in which women do emotional heavy lifting on and off the job: 'as traditionally more accomplished managers of feeling in private life, women more than men have put emotional labor on the market, and they know more about its personal costs'. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 11. See too the discussion of women's 'unseen labor' that is 'crucial to getting things done' in all spheres, *ibid.*, esp. p. 167. Here, Mary is extracting emotional labour demanded and honed in her job as a social worker, and applying it to a private setting. For recent historical work on the interplay between gender, the workplace, personal skills and different types of emotional labour, see Claire Langhamer (2017), 'Feelings, Women and Work in the Long 1950s', *Women's History Review*, 26 (1), pp. 77-92.

home, he'd recently refitted his kitchen, he'd made all the cabinets himself out of pear wood. I didn't mind that, I admired him for being able to do that. We parted in the car park and he said, I'll ring you. But he didn't. Of course I was new to this and didn't know what to expect. So I rang him and he came out with what might have been legitimate reasons, my sister's ill etc. And I thought do I want anything to come of this? And it fizzled.

Despite his touchiness and bragging, Mary was prepared to meet him again. The feeling was not mutual; the interaction of his disability and the physical setting of their meeting, up steep stairs, had broken the spell for him. Although in recollection it was clear the clues were there, at the time Mary had underestimated the degree to which a date could be thrown off balance by the appearance of a faint power shift from man to woman.

A third and final restaurant encounter was even more fraught: its tensions emerging from the initial phone call. He 'sounded almost too enthusiastic' when he rang up and suggested a 'venue' for a meal that 'just for a change wasn't Chelmsford' since he lived on the London side of Essex. Once more, deciding to meet required the weighing of mutual convenience and willingness to compromise. I thought, 'oh gosh it's going to be a bit difficult to find somewhere; it would have to be Billericay.' And once again Mary knew the place they decided on. But the man disrupted mealtime norms in a way that troubled Mary.

He was bizarrely suggesting a late afternoon early supper... I didn't mind because it was fairly local to me anyway. I said, "oh that's fine"- it was something like half past five or something like that and he was waiting outside which I thought was quite polite really.

The reality was less salubrious.

I'm thinking he'd just turned up. We went in, I knew the restaurant quite well, I used to go with my younger daughter when she had lunch off. The married couple who owned it and said hello to me then turned to him and said, "oh hello again".

Mary learned that the man had spent his day hanging around the restaurant.

He'd come to the locality late morning, toured that area, gone to a local garden centre, bought himself a garden set, then gone to the restaurant, I suppose to

make sure he knew where we were meeting, had lunch, then gone to somewhere else, then came back to the same place and had an afternoon tea. And as it transpired the whole time he'd been telling them about how he was going to meet "this woman" – those were his words – for a meal early evening, based on the info the [matchmaking] company had told him.

Although she didn't know at the time his movements or the way he was referring to their meeting, Mary found the fact that he had already been that day to the restaurant 'a bit odd, he played it down, said I've been in here already, and said he had been in the area, was making excuses'. The symmetry of the romantically exploratory meal had already been troubled by the fact that the date had been there already. But the real surprise, unequivocally negative, particularly in the context of the meeting, came next. It 'took my breath away', Mary recalled. Her date proceeded to ogle the 'extremely well endowed' waitress. When she came to take the order he 'focussed on a particular part of her anatomy, seemed to forget why we were there.'

His behaviour suggested sexual menace, disrespect and rejection all in one. But again Mary deployed her well-honed socio-emotional skills, and thought she'd 'better save the day and ask him about himself or say something about me'. But this attempt to get the date back on track didn't work, and she had to reprimand him. 'You could see his focus was elsewhere. And I said, excuse me, "am I boring you? And he said, "did you see the tits on that?"' After being 'forced into having a coffee', Mary found herself in a confrontational position outside, telling him: 'I found your demeanour and your comments completely unacceptable, don't even think about contacting me'. She saw him not only as a personal offender, but as a risk to other women and a sign of the agency's negligence. The encounter prompted Mary to respond to the company's request for a report on the date in a particularly full way: 'lets say the piece of paper they sent for the report wasn't big enough. So they phoned me when they received my comments - I told them somebody like him shouldn't be on their books'.

Mary's mealtime encounters showed how restaurants – as places for spending money – became an important theatre of assessment, staging a complex array of antagonisms and dynamics. However much Mary sought to meet on an equal footing she was repeatedly reminded that gendered expectations remained central, even if these were far from

stable by the mid-1990s.¹³⁸ These dinners also underscored the ways in which mediated dating in particular sharpened conflicting agendas between men and women, by putting extra pressure on first impressions, manners and the impulse to pay. Ultimately, Mary's dinner experiences resulted in stark estimations of an unbridgeable gender gap which showed that 'men have totally different agendas depending on their own experiences – they don't have malicious intent but different reasons for facilitating a companion'.

For some of the other women I interviewed, restaurants were also used for a variety of ends that actually pushed romantic harmony further away. For former BBC employee Adele, dinner was often a crude romantic gesture used to distract from less desirable reality (such as the man having another partner), something to make it 'worth my while, I think'.¹³⁹ Elaine, the respondent who later married a man she met in *Time Out*, was invited to dinner by a man she met through Dateline and instructed to bring a friend for a friend of his so that it would be a double date, but 'the friend would be awful, for my nice friend, I don't know why I went along with it.' Ironically, when Elaine met her future husband, they avoided restaurants all together, opting instead for going 'round the corner to the local pub.' It is telling that the quality of the meeting and its aftermath eclipsed any details about what was consumed and who paid for it.

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When Colette Sinclair signed up to agencies after becoming 'a bit exhausted' by countless dates arranged through the personals, she had become fatigued by the 'routine', of 'vetting advertisements carefully, disregarding their wilder claims, not getting too carried away by possibilities, writing back to the ones I chose, waiting for their replies (or not hearing from them at all), meeting them, and all the palaver that follows that....'¹⁴⁰ This evocation of fatigue caused by repeated cycles of self-presentation, arrangement, hope, rejection and failure went to the heart of contemporary courtship, and particularly mediated courtship.

¹³⁸Arguably, of course, gender has never been stable. See Joan Scott's recent meditation on the constitutive instability of gender as a historical concept, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹³⁹Interview, Dec 10 2015, London.

¹⁴⁰Sinclair, *Manhunt*, p. 142.

For some, third party dating was ultimately a success, allowing singles to personally grow, gain confidence and in some cases to meet a partner. But the cycle of trying and failing was ubiquitous, and was central to the ambivalent relationship not only between singles and the matchmaking industry, but also between romantic modernity – characterised by multiplicity of options and the freedom to pursue a range of relationship types – and the yearning for ‘the one’. And there was more ambivalence in the contradictory relationship that lay between men and women; groups that sought each other out, but found that in practice their expectations were either not met, or resulted in acrimony. Disappointments ranged from revulsion at individuals or indeed whole groups (‘men’) to dead-end relationships. Mary’s experiences showed how romantic hopes could fall apart when two strangers met across a table and a gender divide, while for Pen Fudge all the men she met through the small ads were ‘disasters’ who lied about their professional status and repeatedly betrayed her trust.

But who was being blamed for the bigger failures of paid matchmaking, as well as for its smaller micro-disappointments – the mediation, the opposite sex, the matchmakers, or the daters? How did people process and think about romantic failure? As consumers of a service, to what degree did they engage with the need to just keep going, refining the self and the process as they went?

One source of blame lay with the customer and their expectations. Several Mass Observation testimonies suggested that those who failed at agencies and lonely hearts were those with too-specific expectations: one observed how in reality that ‘tall dark businessman’ she had enjoyed imagining ‘becomes a frog’.¹⁴¹ Colette Sinclair understood the perils of too-focussed expectations, insisting that the only way to manage the quest for ‘Mr Right’ was to ‘try everything’, and that ‘to find Mr Right you have to meet a lot of Wrongs first’.¹⁴² Indeed, the balance of stress between individual emotional and administrative labour and the matchmaker’s ‘product’ was increasingly shifting over the period towards self-responsibility. By the mid-2000s, mediated dating would emerge as a fully self-directed operation as online platforms gained prominence, flattening out the middlewoman in favour of an algorithm, an interface and thousands of options. In some ways, Mary’s narrative foregrounds this shift, returning repeatedly to

¹⁴¹MOP, DR, B2917, Summer 2001.

¹⁴²Sinclair, *Manhunt*, p. 40.

the tension between individual responsibility and consumer expectation, and more particularly, unease around her own expectations. When her ‘three year subscription came to renewal... I said no way, I’ll never go down that road again’. Was the agency to blame? ‘In fairness it was a mixture of things’, Mary said. But the agency tried repeatedly to shift the responsibility for her dissatisfaction on her, insisting that she should ‘broaden’ the ‘type of advertising’ they could do for her since ‘I suppose my interests, reading, certain types of novels etc, were too specific in hindsight.’ At the same time, Mary explained: ‘ I was saying what I needed, I put it in inverted commas, what I wanted, why look on back on it and regret it... I don’t like putting blame on anybody – they were very successful... Then again some people’s expectations are just far less than mine.’

Mary envisioned reassurance, expertise and the pleasure of being taken in hand so that she could meet a suitable ‘companion’.

I suppose I thought I had in my head there’d be people sitting there saying, “oh we’ve got just the woman for you” and another person saying “oh we’ve got just the chap who came in the other day”. But I don’t think it worked and I don’t think they did it like that at all and that’s what put me off.

Remembering, Mary blamed herself: ‘I had a rose-tinted view of how it would work out’. Mary admitted she was looking for ‘a background, no disrespect for anyone, I looking for someone professional, a lawyer or whatever, or like yourself, an academic or whatever’. Mary’s testimony accentuated unease surrounding her expectations, punctuated by ellipses of self-scrutiny, apology and assertion, suggesting confusion over whether the expectations were her fault, the matchmaker’s fault or something to stand by.

It sounds awful, you want to say “oh I don’t care what people are like as long as they’re kind”. But actually when you look at it you have expectations in your head, and [the matchmaker] was good at teasing those out. Sometimes you haven’t analysed those things yourself but when you stop and thinking about it you do have expectations.

As the histories of Elaine and Michael and Millie, the pair successfully matched through the Hedi Fisher agency show, mediated dating could offer rewards for perseverance. But the cumulative cost of that perseverance – repeated bouts of emotional labour

expended on unappealing strangers, the stimulation and depression of hopes and expectations – was too great for some and they abandoned the attempt. Failure still rankled, though as mediated dating continued to expand, it became increasingly integrated into the normal course of courtship. However, the romantically-framed sexual relationship at the heart of the encounter was not so amenable to integration. For even as the technologies and practices of self and sex were changing rapidly, feelings about gender and the romantic other often went against the grain, ‘syncopated’ with generation, personal history, economics and circumstance. The forms, norms and demands of modern relationality would shift further as the internet gained ground. But until the end of the pre-internet dating period, and possibly beyond, men and women continued to bring a patchwork of older, contradictory feelings about each other to the candlelit table. In many cases, these fatally disrupted the seamless modernity that mediated dating services purported to bring to the romantic quest, and helped constitute contemporary British singlehood as a position of profound sexual and emotional ambivalence, albeit one framed by novel forms of flexibility.

Conclusion

Two people with little to say to each other, nervously drinking red wine, knocking hands over the bread basket, and making banal comments about the champignons. Such scenes, in which daters tested romantic potential over dinner, were a recurring image in dating documentaries such as *Singles*. Two decades later, the Channel 4 programme *First Dates* would rise to prominence offering audiences the chance to watch strangers wrestle with gin and tonics, escargots and sea bream as they try to ascertain chemistry. On TV, food is an entertaining prop but the meal is also gripping because it shows men and women grappling with complex and demanding social and gendered dynamics: dates derive their fascination for TV audiences – and particularly British audiences – because their format seems to exacerbate the tensions of competing sexual agendas as well as to create discomfiting degrees of awkwardness.

But audiences also want to know: ‘will it/ does it work?’ The question of whether mediated dating works has been at the centre of matchmaking discourse since the late 19th century. I have kept this question largely secondary, pursuing questions of means rather than ends, but in closing it deserves some attention. My answer in relation to the evidence considered in this thesis suggests that, between 1970 and 2000, mediated matchmaking was actually rigged *against* working. On one hand, this was a period in which women like Elaine, born in the early 1950s, were able to move away from the seemingly repressive world of their parents by sleeping with multiple partners, embracing sex and dating, including mediated dating, as part of a lifestyle facilitated by the legislative and contraceptive advances of the 1960s and 1970s. But for many, including those born earlier in the century, older sensibilities overlaid and complicated the novelty of the new sexual landscape. *Singles* brought a patchwork of values and feelings about the proper role of men and women to the table, often, as we saw in experiences such as Mary’s, clashing over them. This is one reason that, rather than melt the gap between romantic agents, matchmaking tended to exacerbate their differences.

Another reason for its tendency towards failure concerned the strain of managing and recovering from multiple blind dates. Mediated dating accentuated unrealistic

expectations and hopes, generating encounters hamstrung by awkwardness and romantic dissonance, and amplifying the adversarial potential of the heterosexual encounter. The exposure to such encounters demanded the cultivation of an outlook on love that required rigorous management of the process, and which therefore jarred with persistent ideas about the authenticity and naturalness of romance. But however energetically they embraced it, the strategic approach to dating – exemplified in Linda Sonntag’s account, or in many of John Cockburn’s interviews – did not necessarily make singles more successful at finding a partner, as the Colette Sinclair memoir, oral history testimonies and a number of Mass Observation diaries made clear. Those who continued searching this way had to adapt to its realities and find ways to accommodate rejection, failure, and repetition – the flipside of their apparent freedom and options. Some, like Colette Sinclair, did so by continually modifying their search tactics; others, such as Mary, did so through self-critique, wondering if their expectations were too high. Sinclair was a particularly fulsome example of the ways in which a dedicated course of blind dating could cause desensitisation and emotional fatigue – afflictions that barred, rather than facilitated, the road to love.

The same problems plague today’s internet daters. In bringing strangers together, dating services continue to stage tensions between a wide variety of agendas – sexual, relational, romantic, gendered. But technology has drastically extended the pool of possible dates, and, according to scholars and commentators, radically transformed the dynamics and possibilities of romance.¹ The desire to pick apart the latter claim provided a starting point for this thesis, and I took the normalisation of internet dating as an obvious benchmark for considering earlier forms of mediated dating. Indeed, the present enormity of internet dating, and the apparent rapidity of its development after the switch to Web 2.0 in the late 1990s, had initially led me to frame this project as a ‘prehistory’ of internet dating. But as the project developed, it soon became clear that the expansion of internet dating was an unsatisfactory rupture point, and that online dating was more accurately thought about as a sequel, or inheritor, of what came before. Far from transforming relations between men and women, the Internet could rather be seen as having deployed new technology to serve and cultivate trends and dynamics that

¹Bernie Hogan, Nai Li and William Dutton, W.H. (2011), ‘A Global Shift in the Social Relationships of Networked Individuals: Meeting and Dating Online Comes of Age’, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford; Eli Finkel et. al (2012), ‘Online Dating: A Critical Analysis From the Perspective of Psychological Science’, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 13(1), pp. 3–66.

had been in train for at least 30 years. After all, if internet dating is a clearing house for a spectrum of desires, aspirations and urges, these are possible only in a context of relative flexibility, one in which romance and sex are not assumed to be leading to marriage and family. To understand the present romantic landscape, then, internet dating needed to be placed in a longer spectrum of singleness and mediated dating that tracked back, at the very least, to the first decade in which it was both possible and realistic to tease sex, romance and marriage apart. Thus although its focus throughout has been on a past era, this thesis can be seen as an insistence on the historicity of the experiences of, and structures faced by, contemporary British mediated daters.

In being occupied with the three decades preceding the normalisation of internet dating around 2000, this thesis has been organised by theme rather than by chronology. In Chapter Two I analysed matchmaking services by decade, flagging up distinctive aspects of the industry in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Generally, however, I have approached this study in terms of the whole period. I proceeded this way partly to escape what Joe Moran has called ‘decadology’, a means of thinking about history that can misrepresent the unevenness, the waywardness, of change.²

Nonetheless, while the utility of 1970, 1980 and 1990 as breakpoints should be regarded critically, there is something of a decadal story here, with distinctive relational norms and contexts that invite some review in closing. Throughout this thesis, I have used 1970 as the start point of a new era, echoing the chronology put in place by historians of mid-century Britain and the so-called ‘golden age’ of marriage: Claire Langhamer, Alana Harris and Timothy Willem Jones and Charlotte Greenhalgh have all given 1970 as the end-point to their recent studies. As Callum Brown and Hera Cook have persuasively argued, key cultural and contraceptive shifts in the 1960s, and particularly the late 1960s, were integral to the making of modern secular sexuality – these changes would take full effect in the 1970s as their studies, which run to 1975, suggest.³ As for the importance of the 1970s, this thesis has been in agreement with Ben Mechen that – thanks to a number of political and policy changes – influential new discourses emerged

²Joe Moran, ‘Decoding the Decade’, *The Guardian*, 14 Nov 2009, p. 30. See discussion of the decadal ‘shorthand’ among popular and academic alike in Lawrence Black (2012), ‘An Enlightening Decade? New Histories of 1970s’ Britain, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82, pp. 174-186: 175.

³Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution*; Callum Brown (2011), ‘Sex, religion, and the single woman: the importance of a “short” sexual revolution to the English religious crisis of the 1960s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2), pp. 189-215.

that profoundly altered the status of sexual relationships.⁴ This, together with the increased visibility of feminist discourse (including mockery of feminist demands) after 1970, had a profound impact on how people negotiated heterosexual relations. Within mediated dating, the high-profile launch of *Time Out*'s lonely hearts section in 1971 and the climate of sexual freedom and opportunity it seemed to suggest with its sexually explicit and culturally eccentric ads, along with the consolidation of *Dateline*'s success in the early 1970s, all signalled a new era. As discussed in Chapter Two, marriage bureaux continued to operate throughout the decade, but by the mid-1980s, the personals pages of *Time Out* and those of the national *Singles* magazine, along with a new crop of introduction agencies, suggested that dating had definitively moved towards being part of an exploratory lifestyle rather than a means for marriage. The 1970s was key to this process, with psycho-therapeutic, astrological and spiritualist currents helping to create a distinctive culture around sex and relationships.

As has already been suggested, consideration of sexual culture and gendered identities in Britain in the 1980s invites contextualising within Thatcher's premiership. In this study, Thatcher's presence was felt as the pro-enterprise force facilitating the founding of dozens of introduction agencies – small businesses that also encouraged customers to bring enterprising tactics to bear on the quest for love.⁵ In agency marketing rhetoric, more subtle effects of 1980s, pro-consumption culture emerged, with matchmakers promoting an 'exclusivity' that hinted at class elitism but was, in reality, more concerned with money and professional aspirationalism. This movement towards matching people on grounds of ambition, or professional achievement – as opposed to the more fixed tri-partite class categories used to pair *London Weekly Advertiser* lonely hearts in the 1970s – suggested the emergence of a more flexible system of social categorisation for use in assessing romantic suitability. But at the same time, the apparently classless emphasis on the spiritual and personal promise of sexuality advanced by Alex Comfort in the 1970s ebbed, making way for a strong interest in how the quest for romance could be better organised, hierarchized and instrumentalised. One

⁴Ben Mechen (2015), *Everyday Sex in 1970s Britain*, PhD thesis, UCL.

⁵Sandy Nye, the former wife and business partner of *Dateline*'s founder John Patterson, was clear that both she and Patterson were fans of Thatcher for the business climate her premiership created: 'We loved her. We loved her... She was for the young business, people willing to put her back into it'. Interview, 18 Feb 2016, Kent.

effect of this was that the seepage of materialism into the romantic field became a more marked feature of singles discourse.

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the consolidation of these themes, and particularly the emergence of the 'single lifestyle' as a concept that included a bold and self-knowing approach to sexuality and dating, and that invited certain types of consumption (particularly of alcohol and food). Crucially, the 1990s was the decade in which dating services began to approach the mainstream. As discussed in Chapter Two, national newspapers launched their lonely hearts services in the late 1990s, while the scale of interest by the media in mediated dating also changed, with singleness and singles services attracting for the first time a number of non-satirical, mainstream broadcast investigations.⁶ By the end of the decade, *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* had affirmed singleness as a subject of sufficient global recognition and fascination to be commercial gold. Crudely put, between 1970 and 2000, single identity was moulded by a range of social, political and cultural factors into a key lifestyle phase, difficult and fun, normalised yet vexed, and above all, a highly gendered experience defined by biological asymmetries between men and women. As matchmaker Penrose Halson's memoir affirmed, the 1980s saw the emergence of the figure of the single woman who had chosen her career over her personal life alongside that of men who had also been seduced by career into neglecting relationships.⁷ But in the 1990s, with the spread of popular representations of singleness and dating focussing on women in their 30s, singleness came to be seen as a women's issue in which biology had finally caught up with a generation that had apparently been taught to pursue their professional rather than their romantic fate. Thus, looking at 1970-2000 as a set of decadal micro-periods underlines the sheer number of new factors that shaped singles' experience in late 20th century Britain. Nonetheless, and remaining cognizant of the depth of debate about whether historical change can or should be pinned to specific moments and dates, this thesis has offered an account of late 20th century British intimacy that sees the 1970s as a flashpoint in the history of heterosexual experience, with the social, cultural and

⁶In addition to *Singles* and *Man Seeks Woman*, the 1990s also saw frank investigations of women's sexuality such as *The Truth About Women* (ITV, 1998), as well as in dramas such as *Real Women* (BBC, 1998) and *This Life* (BBC, 1997). Earlier, comedic treatments of mediated dating on TV include quiz show *Blind Date*, launched in 1985 and a *Carry On* film dedicated to computer dating fraud, *Carry On Loving* (1970).

⁷Penrose Halson, *Happily Ever After: How To Meet Your Match* (London: Pan, 1999), p. 108.

emotional currents that underpinned its radical changes structuring the options for what came next.

In considering the bigger picture, it should be remembered that a relatively small fraction of Britons ever used singles services even at their pre-Internet peak in the 1990s. In light of this, why does mediated dating matter, and why did it attract a visibility that far exceeded its social impact? Chiefly, I would argue, mediated dating interested onlookers because it represented a cipher for the self as a 'modern' man or woman, and offered an opportunity for reflecting on a rapidly shifting, sometimes bewilderingly unstable romantic landscape. Indeed modernity, as it was invoked by commentators, experts and singles, referred to a populace facing a terrain of expanded sexual opportunities that invited new forms of control, self-management, experimentation, but also loneliness. This was a state of affairs in which mediated dating was both the perfect, or at least, the logical solution, as well as a symptom of malaise and alienation. Mediated dating also appeared to be the response to another seemingly quintessentially modern development: a growing demographic of single people who had either never married, not yet married, or were divorced. This multi-aged group was sufficiently broad, difficult to pin down, and composed of shifting sub-categories to attract a wide range of anxieties spanning lone motherhood, footloose men, childless career women, and the isolated and poor elderly.

In addition, the interest in mediated courtship, and single life more broadly, fed off the tensions and contradictions inherent in the topic, and it is to ambivalence, I think, that we must return to capture both the representational and the experiential spheres of mediated romance in late 20th century Britain. Crucially, singleness embodied the paradox of contemporary solo life, in which finding love was at once a reflection of self-determination, 'patience and perseverance' and a measure of the luck, fate and fortune implied by the very concept of finding 'the one'.⁸ A number of contradictory notions reinforced this paradox. Serendipity and authenticity (the 'natural') were stressed alongside the sensibleness of taking control and outsourcing this need like any other. It also seemed that while singles faced the widest possible horizon of beneficial sexual choice, they were also failing to achieve the enduring gold standard of

⁸Linda Sonntag, *Finding the Love Of Your Life Using Dating Agencies and Small Ads* (London: Piccadilly, 1993), p. 20.

monogamous commitment. In sum, late 20th century singleness appeared inherently full of potential, and redolent of failure. Singles were acutely aware of these contradictions, observing in letters, MOP diaries, newspaper articles and interviews how they could, should or didn't fit within the social and cultural norms surrounding love, sex and romance.

Running throughout this thesis is a concern with the operation of a market whose offer of choice and control undergirded the particular contradictions of mediated dating. In brief, in buying the chance to rifle through a range of options, the dater herself also became one of many options to be rifled through and potentially dropped. This was the sharp end of the consumer approach. But to what degree did market logics actually infiltrate and shape the affect brought to bear on relationships — as sociologists have insisted they have done — by encouraging daters to treat the romantic 'field' as consumers? By following the reasons singles gave for using services, and their experiences of doing so, this thesis has, in fact, suggested that however marketised the mediated dating process, the effect of this on the internal organisation of feeling and desire was equivocal. Romantic aspiration may have been pursued in terms borrowed from the consumer sphere, but feelings, and romantic outcomes, did not align accordingly, as Sinclair's experience made especially clear. Some daters, of course, had internalised the competitive logic of choice, but this was seen as a mistake; one man described by Linda Sonntag 'had been doing [the personals] for years, and decidedly offputting it was too, because it seemed that he was still hoping the next post might bring a letter from somebody better'.⁹ Indeed, as services became more mainstream, it became clearer that mediated dating was something to get right — daters should not buy too fully into the sense that people were products that could ever be upgraded and disposed of; nor should they be standoffish about dating multiple people. Mediated dating required aptitude and refinement of approach, pointing the way to the search-literacy demanded of internet dating portals in which users choose between algorithmic browsing; random matching, or flicking through pictures. The challenge, then as now, was to maximise effective usage of the services without losing the humanity integral to the romantic connection. But losing sight of the latter was not, as far as my research has showed, considered a fair price to pay for the former.

⁹Ibid., p. 52.

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There are a number of directions that future work on late 20th century intimacy and romance might take. Divorce was one of the drivers of the singles service clientele in the 1970s and after, and its impact on the single experience merits a more sustained enquiry than I have been able to do here. Moreover, as I suggested in Chapter Four, post-1970s singles culture was marked by the influx of adults and professionals, rather than teens, into dating. Further investigating the differences between groups of daters, drawing out how being divorced or a single parent shaped not only dating experience but views and feelings about romance, would be a fruitful way of further digging below the demographic evidence documenting the rising divorce rate and number of single parents.

If marital history is one factor that could be further explored, then the ways in which age and generation intersect with the experience of romantic status in the late 20th century also invites future research. Charlotte Greenhalgh's forthcoming book investigating loneliness among the elderly population of Britain in the middle century offers up numerous avenues for exploration.¹⁰ Focussing on the emotional and institutional terrain around widowhood, the study argues for the centrality of the experience of older people to a full understanding of selfhood and love in 20th century Britain. As lifespans increased in the latter part of the century, old age became an even bigger category, including a wider variety of relational pasts shaped by divorce and widowhood as well by the decision to not marry, or failure to do so. A study of late 20th century romantic solitude in old age would also shed light on how older men's and women's experiences differed.

A further avenue relates to a fuller investigation of the links between locality and attitudes to intimacy in post-1960s Britain. This study set out to scrutinise British, as opposed to English, sources, including national newspapers and magazines, and its call for oral histories was placed in a national magazine. Nonetheless, the focus that emerged was on England. There is certainly scope for a more sustained engagement

¹⁰Based on her PhD thesis (2012), *An Age of Emotion: Expertise and Subjectivity in Old Age in Britain, 1937-1970*, University of Oxford.

with place: not only metropolitan versus non-metropolitan, but specifically tethered to locales around Britain – research by sociological scholars such as Pearl Jephcott, working in the mid-century, and by more recent historians such as that by Andrew Davies and Szepter and Fisher, emphasises the richness of regional courtship cultures and attitudes to romantic intimacy.¹¹ In the later part of the century, the question of whether an increasingly globalised, centralised Britain created uniform romantic norms is pertinent – a future study might ask to what degree local customs, or simply locality, determined the meanings and experience of romantic status.

And finally, from the 1960s onwards, the US was producing a far more developed discourse relating to singleness, dating and specifically mediated dating than was Britain. The flow of ideas about dating and romance from the US was rich and influential, from the findings of relationship ‘scientists’ William Walster and Elaine Hatfield to books interrogating the options for singles, and manuals for successful dating. The wealth of American sources documenting courtship culture in the post-1960s era could form the basis of a trans-Atlantic study tracking the way ideas and feelings about courtship and romance developed in Britain. John Godwin’s *The Mating Trade*, an exhaustive investigation of all aspects of singles culture in the US in the 1970s, was just one of dozens of books and magazines dedicated to investigating American mediated dating from the 1960s onwards.¹² Godwin’s study alone throws up numerous fascinating avenues for future research, including a games club that operated in San Francisco in the 1970s, run by two women, in which singles interacted over a range of ingenious games including one in which two opposing sides had to debate the merits of each demand of the women’s liberation movement.¹³ This hints at even wider parameters of the courtship industry than this thesis has explored.

Ultimately, however, the primary contribution of this thesis has not been to exhaustively describe the matchmaking industry. It has been to show that the industry offers a novel purchase on the unique opportunities, contradictions and tensions that came to define heterosexual intimacy in late 20th century Britain. Dating brought ideas about

¹¹ Agnes Pearl Jephcott, e.g. *Some Young People* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1954); Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992).

¹² John Godwin, *The Mating Trade* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973).

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–38.

romantically appealing models of masculinity and femininity into contact with actual men and women. Whether the customer got what they wanted or not, the period between 1970 and 2000 saw the entrenchment of the idea that it was singles' personal responsibility – emotionally, strategically, and presentationally – to find what they were looking for. As the thickening tide of dating manuals in the late 1980s and 1990s made clear, agencies and personal ads could make it possible for singles to search, but it was up to them how successfully they did so. But however much they decided to *work* to bring it about, and however 'modern' this effort seemed to be, the sense that a more effortless romantic fate was out there somewhere hovered over the process. The mystery of the balance between pragmatism and destiny in contemporary approaches to love has remained unresolved.

Appendix

Adverts used to source oral history interviews. NB Saga advert was severely limited by space.

Advert placed in *Saga*

Ever used the personals, an intro agency or Dateline pre-2005? I'm working on a PhD study at the University of Sussex about the history of matchmaking in Britain in the years before the Internet and am looking for participants: for confidential interviews in public, convenient place, pls contact z.stimpel@sussex.ac.uk

Advert circulated to students at Birkbeck, University of London

Dear students

Were you single and dating at any point between 1970 and 2000? If so, did you ever use dating services, such as introduction agencies, personal ads, or computer dating services such as Dateline?

If so, I'd absolutely love to hear from you. I'm working on a PhD at the University of Sussex about the history of matchmaking in Britain in the years before the Internet - and am seeking real people who used services, from placing their own ads, to enlisting the help of a bureau, agency or computer, to share their thoughts/recollections.

If you're interested, then please email me at z.stimpel@sussex.ac.uk. Interviews would be informal, relaxed, held in a public place of your convenience, and anonymous - none of your personal data will be stored, or published, unless you expressly request.

Very best

Zoe Strimpel

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/339842>

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